

# **The 'Do Not Fucking Touch Me' Tour**

**MellytheHun**

## The 'Do Not Fucking Touch Me' Tour by MellytheHun

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**Summary:**

Richie Tozier's taken up writing his own material for once, and it could absolutely ruin him

# 1. The Comeback

## Author's Note:

- For [xpatxperience](#).

I have a billion updates to make, I know, but I've been sitting on this for almost a month, and I just hAD to post it. Something I've found in the IT fandom is that no one writes Richie's material, they only mention it, or they prescribe him all of John Mulaney's work (which everyone is correct to love him, so v good), but I wanted to write a special for Richie that felt more like /his/ sense of humor.

I am not particularly funny, I've never written a stand-up before, pls be gentle, but i had to do the thing, so i hope u enjoy it

In the comments lemme know if u want a steamy end to chap 2 or keep it light. I still can't decide

This fic is a gift to xpatxperience bc they're seriously an angel, and i plan to dedicate more fics to them in the future. Talking meta, and fan-personing all over fave characters in the comments is amazing to do with readers, and xpatxperience is so gracious, and so giving in their consistently supportive reviews, always helping me stay motivated, and inspired. I look forward to hearing their thoughts every fic I post, so this one's for them! <3

EDIT: Now available in Russian here: <https://ficbook.net/readfic/8854672>

“Wow,” Mike breathes out, entering the empty theatre; Bill gives a low whistle of amazement that Mike nods in agreement with, “This is pretty incredible, Rich. I almost feel bad, not having to pay for our

seats.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my show, so I get to demand shit like that,” Richie tells him proudly.

“You make unrealistic demands even when it’s not your show,” Stan brings to his attention, crossing his arms over his chest, “Will my wife get any of the jokes?”

“Wow, I mean, first of all, the world revolves around me, so *everyday* is the Richie Show, Stanley, but that aside, no, your wife will probably not get any of my jokes. And if she gets them, she will not enjoy them. The show is mostly me rambling.”

“Perfect, because I’ve never had my fill of you talking,” Stan replies sarcastically; he’s smiling, though.

Grinning at him, Richie pats Stan on the shoulder, and reassures him, “don’t worry - I’ll make a better impression over drinks, after the show. I’m excited to be at a table with you all again - it’s been way too long.”

“It’s been like six m-months since the incident at the J-Jade of the Orient - I’ve barely r-recovered,” Bill tells him, shuddering at the remembrance.

The stammer comes and goes these days with no discernible pattern, as far as anyone can tell, but regardless, no one ever mentions whether it’s there or not, not even Audra.

“Was that half a year ago, already?!” Richie asks incredulously, walking down the middle aisles to show them to their chosen seats, “That’s a long time! Still - it’ll be good to have us all together in the same place again. I’ve been, like, itchy, and weirdly emotional without you guys. We should all just invest in buying an entire floor of an apartment complex, so we can have dinner together every night, and still maintain some boundaries. God knows if Eddie were set loose on my living space, everything would be like - sanitized, and in order, and shit.”

“What a nightmare,” Stan says dryly.

“Right,” Beverly begins gently, “Uhm - about that, Richie...”

Turning to her with some trepidation, Richie frowns with his entire face, completely unintentionally - it’s really very cute.

Beverly wants to laugh, but she manages to keep her face straight as she tells him, “Eddie can’t make it.”

“*What!?*” Richie shouts, “But I’m in New York - I came to stomp *his* neighborhood! I comp’ed him a seat! What the fuck is keeping him!? It’s supposed to be my big comeback show! It’s my *Netflix special!* This is bullshit! And he couldn’t tell me himself!? What the fuck is -”

All of the other Losers glance to each other knowingly; it’s so reminiscent of a tantrum a young Richie might throw at news that Eddie couldn’t make an appearance at his birthday party, or something. Sometimes, being around Richie and/or Eddie is like being transported back in time for the rest of them.

“It was a lot of business jargon, to be honest,” Beverly tells him, “I don’t know for sure - it sounds like the company he works for had a crisis with a contractor in another location. I think he’s in Iowa.”

“*IOWA?*” Richie all but screams, eyes bulging, “Goddamn it!”

Petulant, and bratty, Richie twists around with his arms crossed over his chest, muttering to himself about betrayals of the most profound order; Beverly breaks into a smile, slyly looking over to Ben, and winking.

Ben is the only other one, besides Beverly, that knows that Eddie *will*, in fact, be coming to the show - it’s meant to be a surprise, but Ben secretly thinks to himself that Beverly is gonna blow their cover, for how excited she seems about her undercover mission as the bearer of bad news.

“So, what was with all the waivers we had to sign?” Ben redirects, calling Richie’s attention back to the group, “I mean, I don’t mind you using my full name in the show, I just... I mean, how much humiliation should I be expecting?”

Twirling back around, eyes sparkling with mischief, Richie’s smile

nearly splits his face in half, and he taps his fingers together like a maniacal, evil genius, as he answers, “oh, you all should be fully prepared to get demolished tonight.”

“Richie - you said it was *important* that we all be here,” Mike inserts, gesturing at him, “Is this a farewell show, or something? There were the waivers, the photo collections, and all those emails you sent over the last two months - just - is there something we’re missing?”

Everyone stares in silence at Richie for a while, and after a beat, Richie drops his arms, sighing in defeat.

Adjusting his glasses on his nose, Richie tells them, “you’ll all see later. It’s not a farewell show - I mean, it could end my career, this show, but... well, you’ll get it when you see it.”

“You sure you wanna do it?” Stan asks him, stepping toward Richie, “I know it’s near impossible to back out of deals like this, Richie, and I know there’d be Hell to pay, but no one will force you on that stage. Whatever this is... are... I mean - are you okay?”

“Oof, Stan - ‘okay?’ My general practice guy gave me a study guide on hypertension like, two weeks ago, so that’s pretty relative.”

“*Richie*,” Stan warns.

“Okay, alright - it’s fine!” Richie tells him, shooing his worries away with a flippant hand, “Seriously. I gotta go backstage now, though - I gotta talk to my agent, and the lighting guy, and I need a drink or two in me before I tackle this one. You guys have full access to the bar, by the way; put it on Rottie’s tab.”

“Rottie?” Stan asks.

“My initials are ‘R,’ ‘O,’ and ‘T.’ Instead of being totally obvious about who’s tab it was by putting it under ‘R.T,’ and not wanting you guys to roast me for my middle name by putting ‘R.O.T,’ as the tab name, I joked around with the bartender about it for a while, and he thought it’d be clever to put the name ‘Rottie,’ down, like the dog.”

“Wait, what’s your middle name?” Beverly asks with a growing smile.

“That’s classified information, ma’am, and I don’t believe any of you have clearance on this level. I’m gonna have to ask you folks to leave,” Richie tells them in his most convincing FBI Agent Voice.

They all give a laugh, and allow Richie to usher them to their seats; once Beverly is sat next to Ben, and Stan is comfortably texting his wife their aisle and seat numbers on her other side, Richie leans in closer.

“Hey, uhm... Eddie... he couldn’t reschedule his thing? He - I mean... it... it was really that important?”

She feels awful for him immediately, but not wanting to spoil what would ultimately be a lovely surprise, she tells him, “I’m sorry, Rich. He said it was urgent. He was really sorry about it.”

Her phone buzzes with a text from Eddie right as Richie curses under his breath, missing the noise. She clutches her phone more tightly in her fist, knowing Eddie is wondering where his seat is going to be; she bought him a separate ticket, elsewhere in the theatre, so Richie wouldn’t catch him sitting among them, as he will absolutely, inevitably look over to the Losers for most of the show.

“Okay,” Richie surrenders sadly, “Uh - I guess he’ll see it eventually, right?”

Smiling forlornly at him, she pats his arm, and tells him, “don’t worry, Richie. Your genius will inevitably be forced upon us all.”

He smiles at her, gives her a kiss on the cheek, and when Bill jokingly asks why he didn’t get one, Richie flips him off, and reminds them to treat themselves to the bar in the lobby.

Once he’s backstage, Beverly takes her phone out, and emails Eddie his ticket, explains that she’s already convinced Richie he’s not coming, and to make sure he doesn’t show up too early, or Richie will notice.

**Eddie:** How will he notice if he’s backstage??

**Beverly:** He’s super nervous. I’d bet good money he’s going to be watching the doors. Radio City Hall is gigantic and he’s clearly

working himself up. He'll be on the look-out

**Eddie:** He needs to slow down. I swear, he's gonna fuck up his blood pressure doing wild shit like this all the time

Beverly chuckles at her screen, unable to explain what's so funny to the other Losers, and simply letting Ben glance at her text message, so he can laugh too.

Audra is lovely, as it turns out - she fits in well with the Losers, and Beverly does notice that they bear a striking resemblance to one another. Rather than making it uncomfortable for everyone, Beverly inwardly takes it as a compliment - Audra even mentions that Beverly could be her stunt double, and when everyone else freezes up, Beverly laughs, and tells her, 'now, you're blowing smoke!'

Stan's wife, Patty, is soft-spoken, and takes a real shine to Ben, and Ben to her; upon meeting them all, outside the theatre only an hour beforehand, she seemed cold, and skittish, but she's warmed up quickly, and when she meets them inside the theatre again, she's made a nice space for herself, among them.

"You know, I wondered who you people were," she begins, glancing around at the Losers, "Who it was my husband loved so well, he left them letters near as long as mine."

At the mention of his suicide attempt, Stan grabs her hand, and she entwines their fingers, smiling at him with glassy eyes, "I thought I might hate you all, like you were responsible somehow, but I think I understand now."

Stan smiles at her, and Bill leans over to say, "we're... we're all just s-so glad you're b-*both* here."

There are murmurs of agreement, and when Mike mentions getting drinks for everyone, there's a more loud, clear agreement - he and Bill go to fetch drinks, and theatre concession candy, and they all sit, drink, snack, and catch up.

They complain, and joke about their respective flights into New York, Ben and Patty bond over their shared dislike of how overcrowded the



city is, Stan, Bill, and Mike laugh way too hard amongst themselves - Beverly tells them they're rowdy hooligans, and they laugh even more loudly at her. Audra only smiles at her, and shrugs, as if to say, 'they're up to no good, and I can't even tell what no-good they're up to.'

When Mike mentions that he wonders what Richie's show is about, that it involves all of them, and waiving their privacies to several degrees, Stan tells them all, "I think I know."

"What? You mean, what the show is about? Or why we're in it?" Mike asks.

"All of it," Stan answers, "I think I know why he wanted Eddie to be here so badly, too, but I'm not sure I'm at liberty to speak more to that. Richie and I were always close - I think I know what he's going to do tonight. Why this might be his career-ending show, and all those dramatics. Clearly he's workshopped this show a lot, or it wouldn't be getting this offer from Netflix, but still - I'm just about positive there are some details he left out of his workshops, that he was saving for this show."

"He could get fired for a stunt like that - changing his routine at the last second, while it's being recorded," Patty mentions worriedly.

"Yeah, but Richie is healing - it's bigger than a comedy show. It's about his spirit," Stan explains to her, "I think his journey's been a little different than the rest of ours. Maybe he'll actually talk about it more, after the show, and we'll get why he was willing to risk it all for an hour on a stage. He likes the protection of that barrier, you know - that barrier between an entertainer, and their audience. It protects him from being too vulnerable. He's so sensitive. That's why he's always liked doing this kind of stuff."

There's a brief moment of silence, and then Bill gives a big sigh, and says, "well, Jesus, at least he got better at it."

They all laugh, recalling moments of truly failed jokes in their tweens, when Richie was still figuring out his brand, so to speak, and then they notice VIP ticket holders coming in; the theatre begins to allow trickles of people in, and when the floodgates open, the place is

completely packed.

The Losers have hushed down for the most part by the time seats are really filling, and they're sitting in wait of the house lights to go down when Beverly gets another text.

**Eddie:** I see you guys! I'm across the aisle, on the left side. I'm glad you got these orchestra seats, or I would've been blinded by all these people! This place is enormous! And it looks full???

**Beverly:** he's got a big fanbase in NY!

**Eddie:** ugh

**Eddie:** he doesn't deserve them.

**Beverly:** lol don't be mean! Admit you're excited!

**Eddie:** I'll admit I'm terrified of the waivers I signed, and what in the fuck they mean for my likeness being shared on the internet.

**Beverly:** your undying support of him is so sweet

**Eddie:** omg

Beverly is about to text back when the lights go down, the volume of the auditorium dials down a few notches, and then 'Lover,' by Devendra Banhart begins playing.

"Good evening, and welcome to Radio City Hall!" Richie's Very Serious Adult Voice announces to the house; only the Losers seem to recognize it as Richie's voice, though - they smile at each other in the dim lighting.

"We would like to remind you that the use of any recording devices are strictly prohibited, except for the enormous recording devices roving through the aisles, being handled by people who have a better understanding of good angles, because you are attending an original, Netflix special."

People begin to whistle, and clap - some are catching on to the fact that it is Richie in the P.A system, and wispery giggles ensue among

some of the younger audience members. To the Losers' collective shock, Richie really did become very adept at impersonations, and it's clearly a talent his younger fans love to pieces.

"Please, take this moment to turn off all cellphones, and per -" a phone rings over the speaker, "- oh, uh - excuse me, just let me grab this a second... Hello? No, I'm in the middle of making a speech... for the show! It's my fucking Netflix special, man, I gotta get off the fuckin' phone. Can you imagine being That Guy? The guy whose phone goes off, and actually fuckin' picks up? During a Netflix recording? It's Radio City Hall! We need to be *classy*!"

Some audience members laugh as the made-up phone call is rudely ended, but most of them turn their phones off, as Richie continues, "anyway - please turn off all cell phones, and unwrap any cellophane-wrapped candies - you know that shit's distracting. Everyone in the aisle hates you when you do that. Open the candy now, I'll give you a few seconds to struggle with it. Go ahead."

Several cheery, giggly people open candy bags, bottles, and canned drinks.

A different voice comes on, and tells the theatre, "thank you, all, for your cooperation! And now, ladies and gentleman, please welcome to the stage, Richie Tozier!"

As Richie walks onto stage, the entire theatre positively *bursts* into loud applause, whistling, and shouting, completely overwhelming the music - the Losers all look to each other in amazement, grinning widely, incredulous in the face of Richie's apparent success.

Grabbing the mic, Richie greets the theatre with a wave of his big hand, and a casual, "hey!"

The loud applause continues to Richie's obvious delight, and Beverly, personally, cannot believe that Richie actually looks handsome.

He spent his time backstage wisely, she'll tell him so later; he's combed his hair nicely, neatly, he's wearing a red crew-neck shirt, under a black blazer, and he's wearing dark wash jeans, with laced up boots.

The waves of noise keep coming.

“Yeah! Hi! It’s you guys!”

Richie goes to say something, but the applause only continues - he smiles at them all, not yet glancing at the Losers. He lets himself stare out over his audience, and waits patiently until the applause quiets a little.

“I like saying that. I like saying that, cause it’s never wrong. You can literally point at anyone, anywhere, at anytime, and be like ‘hey, it’s you!’ - and what are they gonna do? Say ‘no?’”

“I swear, if this is all Dad Jokes, I’m gonna strangle him,” Stan tells Bill.

The audience laughs for Richie, and the Losers laugh at Stan.

“No. It’s a single, rare, universal truth... isn’t that remarkable, in its own right?” Richie asks, suddenly serious, “And, I mean - that’s what we’re here to talk about tonight, right? The numbered, liminal truths of the tumultuous human experience?”

The laughter softens to near-silence, and then Richie breaks into a charming grin, whips the cord of the mic, and laughs, “oh my God, no, guys, you came here to laugh - can you fucking imagine, though?”

He’s rewarded loudly for that joke, and Beverly is the first to break - truly laughing at one of his jokes.

Her laughter seems to allow the other Losers to loosen up, and they start grinning.

Richie looks out onto the audience proudly, pauses, takes a breath, and then asks, “so, what’s good, New York?”

There’s a roar of applause.

“I’m Richie Tozier, and -”

The roar of applause becomes a cacophony of bellows, whistles,

cheers, and clapping, and Richie laughs, “oh, man, you guys are gonna be so disappointed. I’m like, *the reason* there’s usually a two-drink minimum at shit like this.”

As the roaring dies down a touch, some laughter moves through the audience, and Richie tells them, “keep up that energy, though - this is a very audience-dependent show, I’m gonna need it.”

The audience calms down, but there’s still healthy laughter going on, as Richie adds, “I’m not even kidding, actually - I wrote this show for six people. Like, six specific people, and no one else. This content isn’t for any of you. Except the balcony people - the balcony seats always know what’s good.”

People sitting in the high mezzanine seats whoop, and applaud him, and Richie points at them, like they have an understanding.

“See? I love that. I love you guys. You know why? Balcony people like me just the right amount.”

Richie then looks down to the front rows, and says, “you A to D aisle orchestra-seaters - you disgust me.”

The audience laughs, and Richie scolds them, “why do you want to be this close? It’s just wrinklier up close. Like, my face, and my clothes - all of it. What choices are you making in your life? See, balcony people get it. They wanted to see me, but not, like, badly enough to dish out the big bucks. And they wanna be a good distance away from whatever smells I give off, which is wise.”

Redirecting his attention back to the balcony seats, Richie smiles again, basking in the laughter.

“Most people in the balcony seats don’t even care about being here. Like, nine times out of ten, balcony folks haven’t even seen my stand-up before. They have no idea what shit they’re walking into, and they don’t care. They’re just hoping this pans out. Fuckin’ - that usher - yes, you - hand a mic to anyone in the balcony. Literally anyone.”

Richie allows an usher a few seconds to struggle toward someone in the middle of the right-side mezzanine, and then he commands, “hey

- turn up the house lights!"

As the house lights go up, Richie purrs, "*oh yeah*, there we go - gettin' sexy now, right? Nothing like some blinding white, theatre lights, revealing the many, appallingly pale, equally white faces of my entire audience demographic to put you *in the mood*."

Mike shouts something about taking offense to that claim, but it gets drowned out by the laughter of the audience and the Losers - Mike could have given it another go, but Richie waggling his eyebrows in a cartoonish, come-hither way makes Mike drop a hand on his face, and laugh instead.

"Talk into the mic - what's your name?"

The chosen audience member taps the mic before saying, "my name's Jordan."

"Jordan! Jordan, you are in a balcony seat, in the middle of a fucking row. You clearly did not give a shit about your seating. Tell me what brought you here tonight."

Hitching a leg up on one of the rungs on his black stool, Richie looks up at the balcony, to Jordan, and folds his arms over his propped up knee.

Jordan, who can't be over twenty-two years old, explains, "uhm, so, my ex-girlfriend is a huge fan of yours, and she cheated on me, so it was a bad break up, and she was never able to see you live, but super wanted to. I saw you were coming to New York, and I saw on Facebook that she was mad she couldn't go to the show, cause she has to work tonight, so I bought a fuckin' ticket to spite her."

There are mixed reviews by the audience, but largely they applaud him, and laugh, and Richie smirks at him, and nods encouragingly.

"Jordan, you are my favorite kind of audience member. You barely know my work, you only gave half a shit about where you sat, and you're here solely out of spite. I'm honored to have the chance to let you down tonight."

Bill partially snorts out his beer at that, and the Losers all laugh

heartily.

“I really think it’s gonna be magical,” Richie tells him sweetly, “What’s the ex’s name?”

“Kelsey,” Jordan replies.

“And she broke your heart?” Richie asks, dismounting from the stool, “Your middle-row, balcony-seat, big-spendin’ heart?”

Jordan laughs with the audience, and admits, “yeah. It wasn’t pretty. She hooked up with one of my best friends.”

Whistling low, and scrunching up his face in disgust, Richie shakes his head disapprovingly, and the audience boos.

“Kelsey is a scoundrel! You want me to tell her to fuck off?”

Jordan gives pause, but then clarifies, “like, for the show?”

“Yeah.”

“Won’t Netflix cut something like that?”

“I literally have no idea - my show is titled ‘Do Not Fucking Touch Me,’ and they’re throwing it up there, so - your guess is as good as mine.”

The laughter is contagious, and Jordan is smiling when he says, “uhh. Yeah. That’d be sick.”

Richie looks around for a center-stage-facing camera to focus on, and squints about through his glasses, “camera-guy! Where’s the - oh! Found it. Okay, hi - big robot eye blinking at me, hello, okay - hey, Kelsey! It’s Richie Tozier! I’m in Radio City Hall right now, with roughly six thousand audience members, and we all got together, cause we wanted the chance to say, *fuck off*, dude.”

Loud applause follows, and the Losers indulge, applauding with everyone else.

“Not cool, Kelsey,” Richie tells the camera, “My man Jordan is here

tonight, and all of Radio City Hall is filled up, and we all think you should fuck off. For real.”

Looking serious for all of two seconds, Richie breaks, smiles, waves his hand away for the camera to stop zooming in on his face, and the house lights dim down again.

He looks back up to the balcony, and waves Jordan to sit down as well, “okay, okay - sit down, dude, I’ve made my point, and you got the coolest, meanest shout-out I’ve ever made at a show. Balcony rules, clearly, Kelsey sucks, and there are five people here tonight that this show is for. Five, you ask? Five? I thought he said six a minute ago? I did! But the sixth didn’t fuckin’ show up!”

Beverly’s heart drops into her stomach, and the Losers all trade looks varying in degrees of humor, and worry amongst themselves.

Beverly’s phone buzzes in her pocket, but she doesn’t dare look.

The audience boos.

“Yes! Good!” Richie tells them, “Fuckin’ boo him! Loudly! And, you know what? Boo Kelsey again, for good measure!”

His spiteful stage persona appears to be a favorite aspect of his act; people begin laughing again, and Richie sighs, swipes the water bottle off his stool seat, and takes a swig from it.

“Okay. Listen. In this line of work, something you hear a lot is ‘tailor to your audience,’ which, like - I get it, right? We have target audiences, outside of Kelsey, *obviously*, and stuff, and the last a lot of you saw of me, I ran off the stage, having forgotten my entire routine, so like, I don’t know who you people are.”

The Losers didn’t know much about that event, though some of them had read up on it, after they’d all left Derry; Stan begins to look particularly worried.

“I don’t know who you are, I don’t know why you’re here, I don’t know why you balled out for orchestra seats like psychopaths, but whatever, listen - I didn’t tailor shit for you guys, okay, not only because I have no idea what kind of audience you all are anymore,



but because I didn't want to. I broke *the rules*. I wrote this for six, specific Losers - that's 'Losers,' with a capital 'L.' I've softened some of the context for you guys, but like, this is for me, and for them, okay? So, don't fuck this up for me. It's my Netflix special, that I wrote for my family. I will edit out hecklers. I don't know if I have that authority, but I'll fuck whoever has the authority, and I'll get them to edit you out. Okay?"

All of the Losers trade looks as the audience around them guffaws - they knew they'd be *in* the show, but they hadn't been warned the show was written *for* them.

"Okay. I'm glad we all have an understanding," Richie says with faux severity, "Tonight, I wanna talk about heroes. That's the theme. The theme of the tour. It's in the title of the show, the subtext of the title of the show, which is embarrassingly clear, so, like -" Richie pauses as laughter ensues, "- I wasn't subtle about it, clearly."

Once the laughter has died down completely again, Richie asks, "wouldn't it be really funny if I never said anything about the show title?"

The theatre's response is more laughter, and he smiles, playing with the wire of his mic, "I'm gonna come back to it, I swear, it's part of the fuckin' set, but wouldn't it be really funny if I just never said anything about it? Like, there's no joke to it - just, don't fucking touch me. The tour."

As the audience busies themselves with laughing, Richie picks up a remote that was planted next to his water bottle, on the stool.

"Okay, now is the time I pick on people to assert dominance - which is very New York, by the way - asserting dominance in a room full of people that could turn on you, at any point. Playing to rooms in New York City is definitely the closest I've ever felt to Julius Caesar. And, I know you all know this already, but JFK is like navigating fucking Jumanji - I stepped off my plane, and heard the fuckin' drums start up, had to outmaneuver a stampede of Hasidic Jews, and I don't know what ring of Hell Penn Station is, but definitely one of them. Probably the fifth. The fifth ring is for, like, road-ragers, and, uh, heretics, or something. Anyway. You guys are maniacs."

Predictably, New York, as a rule, appreciates being described as overtly violent, and very much like a terrifying, supernatural place, and so Richie is cheered whole-heartedly.

Still holding the small remote in one hand, Richie gestures at someone in the front row, and begins, "who's a hero of yours? Like, who's your number one hero? Get the ball rolling for me. Also, direct me to someone else if you can't handle a light roast. This is part of my schtick. I'm mean to you, but meaner to myself - we all get knocked down."

The audience member in the front row that's chosen gives an indiscernible mumble, though it could be the laughter blotting out their voice.

Bringing the mic up to his face again, Richie asks, "Ghandi? Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi?" - he pauses for a second, then, "You didn't even know his full name, did you?"

The audience laughs, and so does Richie.

"No, I'm allowed to be mean to you - I'm allowed! - it's my show! - you're in the front row! You bought a stupid expensive ticket - you're in *Radio City Hall*, do you know that? Do you - okay - listen, Ghandi sucks. No, you picked a bad hero, and you should feel bad. He abused kids, and his wife, and he sucked. I get that he's highly quotable, and whatever, but he sucked."

The audience member gives another mumble, and Richie, to better accommodate them, crouches closer to the edge of the stage, mic still in hand, remote in the other.

"What?" Richie asks, looking incredulous, "No! Dude! Come on! Fuckin' Google it! That shit's old news, it's not - not right now! Google it later! After the fuckin' show!" - Richie and the audience laugh, "Jesus, dude! No, you suck. I'm picking someone else."

Tapping his chin thoughtfully, Richie scans the crowd, and picks someone beyond the sound booth, in the middle, toward the back.

"You! Person with the purple hair! Shout it - you're in the middle

row, I'm not making an usher get to you - just scream it!"

The person with purple hair shouts something, that is only audibly, " - ott Fitzgerald!"

Richie picks up, "F. Scott Fitzgerald? Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald - Mister Francis Scott I-Plagiarized-All-My-Wife's-Work Key Fitzgerald? For real? You know he did that shit, right? He stole all of Zelda's ideas, and pawned them off as his own. Her bipolar disorder made it hard to finish writing stories, so he just took all her good ideas, and put his name on them. Y'all gotta pick up some fuckin' books. Wow. We are off to a rough start tonight."

The audience laughs, and Stan has gone from somewhat panicked, to looking begrudgingly proud of Richie.

"I'm giving you all one last chance. I'm gonna call on the balcony - balcony knows what's up. Balcony is the wind beneath my wings. Don't let me down now, balcony. It's my hour of need."

Looking up to the high mezzanines again, Richie points at someone, and says into the mic, "Green Lantern shirt! Tell me your personal hero. And I swear to God, Green Lantern, if you tell me your hero is your dad, or something, I'm ending the show here, and I'm quitting comedy forever, but for real this time. That shit's a cop out, and you know it."

The audience laughs, of course, but what surprises the other Club members more is that Bill, Mike, Beverly, and Audra laugh too.

Richie looks accusingly at the center audience, as if their laughter indicates that they don't take his claim seriously (which, very apparently, no one does).

"It's true!" Richie tells them, "Anyone who's like 'my mom is my best friend,' or 'my dad is my hero,' as an *adult* - ? - that shit's fucked up, and *not* relatable. And listen, I am not relatable anyway - most days, I'm, I don't know, I'm like a cryptid that lives under a bridge, somewhere - I look like fuckin' Gonzo from the Muppets robbed a Tiki Tourist shop in St. Pete Florida, and I'm about as personally relatable as the fuckin' Babadook, okay? But people with healthy

relationships with their parents? Get the fuck outta here. That shit's made up."

The Losers are falling over themselves - even Stan is holding his chest, and repeating, "fucking Gonzo! Oh my God!"

Putting on a faux, mocking Voice, Richie continues, "*oh, I used to go home to my parents everyday after school, and they'd both hug me, and tell me they're proud of me!* - shut up! Shut up, dude! *Cool!* While you were, like, fostering healthy ties to your family, and got to be a successful, nurtured person in the world, I developed a sense of humor, so - who's laughing now, right?"

Groaning, realizing he's stepped into his own trap of 'who's laughing now,' Richie runs a hand over his face, then breaks the tension with a smile as the audience cheers, and laughs.

"Jesus Christ. I'm being so mean to you guys tonight. Okay. Green Lantern - hit me. Shout it. Who's your hero?"

The audience member yells out, clear as day, "the Rock!"

Richie pauses.

"... like, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson?"

"Yeah!"

The audience applauds, and Richie nods in approval, "damn, no, that's a good one. I can't even give you shit for that one, it's a good choice. Alright. Faith restored. Balcony never lets me down, man."

Walking along the stage, Richie draws full attention back to himself, and then says, "okay, so what was all that for, you might ask, besides asserting dominance, and establishing that I'm the smartest person in the room. Don't worry, baby birds. Mama's here to feed you."

Richie grins ridiculously at the deeply uncomfortable laughter that follows that.

"Okay - the *point* is that my heroes are a billion times cooler than yours, and I'm here to prove it. They're my best friends, and this is

*their* show. And for your convenience, I ranked them - that's right, I ranked my friends, like us feral 90's teens used to do publicly on MySpace."

The audience laughs, and Richie turns excitedly on them, "that's right! That's *right*! We die like men! Do you remember those wild times? Publicly announcing who our favorite people are, showing the world at large who has fallen in and out of our favor week, by week!? It was the fuckin' Hunger Games out there. Game of Thrones is more like historical fiction, based on the socialization of teens in the 90's. The 90's were fuckin' nuts! Such a dangerous time for people with fragile self-esteem."

Amidst the laughter, Richie adds, "good thing I, Richie Tozier, a man whose career is dependent upon the approval of others, has never experienced anything like a crisis of esteem."

He gets a big laugh for that one; including Bill again, who can't seem to just enjoy his beer without Richie interrupting his ability to swallow.

"Okay. Here we go - I'm starting with my best friend from childhood, Stan Uris."

Richie clicks the remote toward the screen that serves as Richie's backdrop on the stage, and the screen shows a collage of photos of Stan, varying from elementary school to high school ages.

There is an array of hearts, rainbows, and emoji stickers all over it.

Stan looks as if he's going to storm out of the theatre, and the Losers laugh gorgeously at his expense.

"My best friend Stan comes in at number six, because I knew it would piss him off."

There's a beautiful, self-congratulatory grin taking up half of Richie's face, as the audience laughs, and he begins laughing too.

He looks out into the audience again, and says, "Stan! Stand up! Stand up, dude! I wanna see that cute, disapproving punim! Come on!"

If at all possible, Stan sinks further into his chair, and when it's clear that no one is standing, the audience laughs again, and Richie moves the mic away from his smile so he can laugh more loudly.

The Losers push Stan around, teasing him that he's the first one getting made into a spectacle.

"Lighting Guy! Find Stan!"

It takes a few moments, but a light shines down on Stan, who's now being elbowed, and noogied by other people in the row, looking generally unamused.

"Stanley the Manly!"

At Richie's sing-song voice, Stan sits up straighter, and through a toothy smile, he shouts back, "fuck you, Richie!"

The audience bursts into laughter, and Richie puts a hand over his heart, as though he's touched.

"Aww. I love you too, Stan! Look at this dork!" Richie tells the audience, pointing at the collage, "Look at him! He had those braces *through* graduation. Dude sucked face with one of the hottest chicks in tenth grade, no fear, with *those* braces. He is a King among men."

Stan buries his face in his hands as the audience, and the Losers applaud, whistle, and laugh.

"That's charming, though, right?" Richie asks, "Like, I tell you he's my best friend, and so I put him at the bottom of my list, because I like pissing him off - do you know what he nicknamed me? He gave me a nickname as a kid. I was like, ten, and Stan the Man over here fuckin' names me Richie *Trashmouth* Tozier."

This garners a louder, more hysterical sounding laughter, and Richie looks exasperated.

"Right?!" Richie asks, throwing his arms out wildly, "*That's* why he's my hero. I mean, that, and he basically dismantled a bunch of old, archaic, patriarchal ideas about Judaism at his own Bar Mitzvah, in front of a full synagogue, and mic-dropped before mic-dropping was

even a thing, but that's not about *me*, so like, what's the point."

The audience laughs, and the Losers are cackling among themselves - even Patty is laughing delightedly.

Smiling like the menace he is, Richie points at Stan again, and tells the hall, "Stan goes hard. But, he's mostly my hero for looking at me, fuckin' ten years old, and saying, 'you made fun wordplay out of my name, and so, in return, I'm going to give you a nickname you will never outlive, and it will associate your *face*, with *garbage*, because that's what I *want* for you, you fuckin' Gremlin,' - like, that's poetry, right there. I called him Staniel, Standrew, Standy, Stanish Manish, Dance-y Stance-y, Stack 'o Stan, Stan Urine, but Stan the Man was my favorite - and he came back at me with fucking *Trashmouth*. Truly remarkable. If ever I became a vigilante hero, that'd be my alter ego name. I'd show up to in-progress crimes, and talk shit til the villains decided prison would be more humane than listening to me a second longer."

The audience applauds, and Stan grins up at Richie, very grudgingly.

"Listen, Stan the Man is the tutting, Jewish mother I truly needed, growing up - and I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'from where I am seated, he appears to have once been an underfed, gangly teenaged boy, and *not* Molly Weasley,' but this is because you all have the wrong image in your head. In my experience, Jewish mothers are less like Molly Weasley, the worrying, sweet mother-to-all of the Harry Potter franchise, and a lot more like the fucking Terminator from Terminator."

The audience laughs, and Richie adds, "this is to say, extremely goal-oriented, and basically willing to commit manslaughter on the account of anyone they love being even slightly mistreated, or inconvenienced."

Smile softening, Stan gazes up at Richie as he moves along the stage, telling his intent listeners, "like, he told me to shut the fuck up constantly, which wasn't traditionally motherly, but - fair - and he discouraged me from, like, operating in most public spheres, and stuff, because of who I am, fundamentally, as a person -" Richie pauses to allow the audience to laugh, "- but Stan the Man is The

Man. He's *the Man*! He's my hero! I love the dude!"

"Sure, he was always worried about my personality having an effect on his, like I was leaking on him, or something - that's a totally valid concern! Again, I'm a Gonzo-Babadook personality type. I don't know what Myers-Briggs acronym is the one for that, but -" the audience peels into new laughter, and Richie says through a grin "- I swear, one time, we were out biking during the summer, right - this was like, the summer of '91, and Stan the Man sees me get my cash out, ready for some soft serve ice cream, and dude in the Mr. Softee truck *drives off* before I get to the window, *just* as I'm approaching."

Lamenting for teenaged Richie, the audience coos sadly, and Richie gestures at them with both his arms, "right?? How fucked up is that?? I was fifteen years old! I had hair in all the wrong places, and my limbs were all lanky, and asymmetrical, and that part never changed, exactly, but I still had acne, and shit - so life was already a fucking nightmare, and Stan stood up, and was like -" Richie briefly switches into an incredibly accurate Batman Voice to say, "' *not in my fuckin' neighborhood,*' - he got on his bike, and chased down this dude, and *cut him off*. On a *bike*! On a *road*! With *traffic*! He could've *died*! He was gonna get hit by a fuckin' ice cream truck, die, and force *me* to face his father, Sarek, astrophysicist, and Vulcan ambassador to the United Federation of Planets, and make *me* tell him his son died on my behalf, because I had been denied some soft serve ice cream with rainbow sprinkles."

The Losers all laugh, though he loses some people in the audience.

"Only half of you got that Star Trek joke. That's fine - it's fine. I mean, I'm disappointed for the other half, but for those of you that got it, you have like, a *crystal clear* version in your head of *exactly* what Stan's dad was like, so."

Shrugging, and laughing to himself, Richie continues, "Stan Uris, you are so lucky I favored Stan the Man over Stan Urine. I mean - listen, those are both very low hanging fruit, but, to be fair, you named me *Trashmouth*, and it *stuck*. So, you still win."

The audience laughs, and Stan flips him off, but his smile is very apparently loving now.



“And you got me my ice cream,” Richie adds - he looks away from Stan again, and the spotlight leaves Stan, perhaps allowing him to breathe again as Richie tells everyone, “I wish you guys could’ve seen this shit - fifteen year old Stan Uris, Stan the Man, a hundred-ten pounds sopping wet, riding his cheap, but deeply cherished, loyal steed into traffic to cut off a dude going eight miles an hour, just to shout at him, like ‘my idiot, trashmouth friend wants *ice cream*, motherfucker, so you’re stopping your *idiot* truck, and giving my *idiot* trashmouth friend his *idiot* ice cream, or you’ll be hearing from my lawyers.’ He was fucking ruthless.”

More laughter fills the hall as Richie monologues.

“He went *after* that guy. Dude was maybe twenty years old, like, maybe a college student home for summer break, didn’t wanna put up with me for the fifth time that week, and Stan destroyed that man’s entire career in exactly five seconds. He just - right in his face, just got right up in there, like, ‘you *worm* of a man - you wanna die today, motherfucker?’ - like whoa! *Whoa!* Jesus!”

“Guys, I feel like you’re not fully appreciating what I’ve told you here today. Stan the Man, as a child, heard me *speak*, and said to himself, ‘this is all for the dumpster,’ - he said to himself, ‘none of this is salvageable - you know what? Even the parts of it that are, I don’t want. I’d throw it out anyway. Trashmouth. His mouth offers me nothing but garbage, I shall name him Trashmouth, and keep him safe for all my days.’

“The genius, the drama, the art - Trashmouth. It fuckin’ stuck like glue, too. I could never tell who hated me, or begrudgingly sort of liked me, because everyone and their dog fuckin’ used that name to refer to me. I was trying so hard to be a Han Solo type, and in two seconds flat, Stan the Man turned me into Jar Jar Binks.”

Mike falls into Bill, laughing harder than his seat has room to contain, and the Losers slap each other, and seem to surrender to the fact that Richie really is funny now.

“Please, a round of applause for Stan the Man -” applause, and whistling erupt in spades, “Stan, you are a hero among men, and every time I follow the misguided whims of whatever craving I’m

experiencing during a bad day, and destroy my digestive system with soft serve ice cream, I think of *you*, man.”

Once the laughter, and applause has died down again, Richie moves to the next collage.

“Coming in at number five is my friend Bill Denbrough - Bill is a deeply beloved friend, he is loyal, caring, compassionate, wise, gentle, sweet, creative as all get-out, you guys probably know him for his world-famous books, and I could move every last one of you to heartfelt tears with stories of his real-life, actual, sincere heroics - but you know what? He fuckin’ punched me in the face when we were thirteen, so I put him at number five.”

Bill gapes in faux offense - it’s more like a giant smile than anything else, and the other Losers howl at his disbelief.

“You heard me right! He *punched me in the face!*” Richie emphasizes, pointing aggressively at his face with his free hand, “I thought I was safe from face-punching, because I was a glasses-wearer! I really thought I was safe! I thought ‘no one’s ever gonna punch a kid *in the face* who wears *glasses!*’ That’d be like, sacreligious, right? That’s a fucked up thing to do - I have *glass* right around my *fucking eyeballs!* No one’s gonna fuck around, and punch me where *my eyes*, and *nose* are, *right?* But Bill fuckin’ Denbrough did!”

“And to give you all a clearer picture here, Bill, Billiam, if you will, handsome, sweet Billy Boy over here,” Richie says, gesturing backwards to the collage, “was picked on ruthlessly in school, didn’t break a hundred pounds til maybe the eighth grade, and had a debilitating stammer, and I’m trying so hard - just - *all the time*, to be funny, and cool, you’d think I’d have a leg up on a guy with a stammer, who’s already bullied more than me, but then my life takes a sharp left turn, the totem pole of likability is completely shattered, because *Bill fucking Denbrough* punches me in the *fucking face.*”

Richie pretends to be genuinely offended that his audience laughs.

“Oh, no, you all think this is so funny - very funny, very funny, I see. I see whose side you’re all on. And you’re all correct, obviously - I absolutely deserved to be punched in the face, at the time - it doesn’t

even matter, the context. Anyone could punch in the face at any time, for any reason, and they'd be right to do so. Frankly, if anyone has even briefly encountered me between the ages of ten and forty, you may be entitled to financial compensation."

The audience laughs, and Richie puts on an 'I'm Taking A Loan Out From The Bank' Voice, very official sounding, "if you or a loved one have, at some point in the past thirty years, been exposed to Richard Tozier, you may be entitled to financial compensation. Richard Tozier is a New England native cryptid, and exposure to him in grocery stores, poorly lit bars, hotel lobbies, public streets, mall outlets, or parking lots may put you at risk. Don't wait. Call 1-800-Bad-Hair-Ugly-Glasses now. Justice for you, and your loved ones, is one solid right hook away."

His imitation is applauded, and he grins, shaking off the Voice, and continuing, "Bill was not acting out of malice, of course. His giant, charming heart is only full of goodness, Disney-animated song birds, and sound morals; he was restoring equilibrium to the universe. Dude smashed my nose, *and* my dignity, and he should be *thanked*."

Looking down at his boots, Richie mutters into the mic, "there's a joke in there about how when it comes to dignity, I can't lose what I never had."

The audience laughs, and Richie looks at them gladly again, "you see, I wanted to title my tour that, too. The entire 'when it comes to dignity, I can't lose what I never had.' I don't know what's wrong with me these days. I could only come up with really long titles to my tour, and that was one of them. You guys have no idea how hard I had to fight for them to let me keep the 'F-word,' in the fucking title."

Sighing as the laughter dies down again, Richie looks up at the collage of Bill, pauses for a few beats, brings the mic up to his mouth again, and then prompts, "isn't he dreamy?"

There are some whistles, and loud applause.

"Fuckin' Bill Denbrough. Literally, one of the bravest, sweetest guys I've ever known, *and* he gets to be hot, which is just so unfair. And he

got to be hot young, too! Isn't that some bullshit? His stammer is endearing, his smile is all - *that way* - *and* he's hot?? It's bullshit. That's total bullshit. My entire life, I've been waiting for my Hot Stage. Like, eventually, at some point, even for a short while, I'll get to be hot too, right? *No !* The fuckin' Puberty God - who I imagine resembles a deeply overworked, severely underpaid, customer service representative - looked down on me, as I prayed on my knees, and I asked the Heavens, 'oh, pretty please, can I be hot, even if it's for like ten minutes when I'm sixteen, and no one's even looking? That's reasonable, isn't it?' And the Puberty God told me, 'wrong, sir! Wrong! Under section 37B of the contract for hormones I've forged your signature on, it states quite clearly that all offers of hotness shall become null, and void if - and you can read it for yourself in this photostatic copy - 'I, the undersigned, shall forfeit all rights, privileges, and licenses herein and herein contained,' et cetera, et cetera... 'Fax mentis, incendium gloria cultum,' et cetera, et cetera... Memo bis punitor delicatum! It's all there! Black and white, clear as crystal! You stole Fizzy-Lifting Drinks! You bumped into the ceiling, which now has to be washed and sterilized, so you get *nothing!* You *lose!* Good *day*, sir!' - I - "Richie pauses for the audience's laughter to quiet down, before saying, "I feel like I'm misremembering exactly what went down... I was paraphrasing, obviously, but the point remains, and the point *is*, I didn't get to be hot. But all my friends get to be! Which is such bullshit! Oh, wait - while we're speaking of hot guys that left me in the fucking dust -"

The next collage is of Ben, with mostly angry emojis all over it.

"Bill, I'll tell you more about how much I love you later, but I'm angry about Ben, so we're talking about him at number four - the absolute nerve of Ben Hanscom - look at that motherfucker! I know what you're thinking - you're thinking, isn't he an HBO miniseries actor? Isn't he on a foreign soccer team? Doesn't he do ads for Calvin Klein? Wasn't he on Dancing With The Stars? Doesn't he make appearances in the new MTV, sex-ified version of Teen Wolf? No, no he fucking doesn't, he's just a dude, in reality, that looks like that, just walking the streets, wild, uncaged, allowed to just roam the public looking like - no - Lighting Guy! Find Ben! Find that son of a bitch!"

The Losers are falling to pieces as Ben tries to hide from the spotlight behind his hands, and Richie is yelling at him from the stage, “what the fuck, man!? We had a camaraderie! You were un-date-able because you studied recreationally, had an affinity for double stuffed Oreos, and willingly spent time in the library during summer break, and I was un-date-able because of the everything about me, and then you *turn your back on me*, and get stupid-hot?! What the fuck!?”

The laughter, largely, seems to be in response to Richie’s hyperbolic dismay, and Ben’s clear desire for a hole to open up beneath him, and swallow him up.

“Your hotness is an actual, personal attack on me, Ben - no - look at me - look at me!”

Ben, laughing hysterically into his hand, lowers it to his mouth, and manages to look up to Richie on the stage with watering eyes, and a completely red face.

Richie can’t help but break into a grin looking back at him.

“Shut up. Fuck you. Nevermind. You’re so cute - fuck you. Look at you, all anxious I put you in the fuckin’ spotlight. I will have you removed, Ben. Do you hear me?”

Covering his face again, Ben shakes with his laughter, and Richie starts to break on stage, too, “I will have you - I swear - I’ll have you fucking removed from the theatre. I’ll kick you out. You’re like that fuckin’ Spongebob episode where Squidward gets all beautiful accidentally, and your jaw is all chiseled, and shit - how dare you, Ben.”

Visibly taking a deep breath to soothe himself and reconstruct his Stage Persona, Richie collects his thoughts for a moment as the audience laughs, and then he breathes out, and says, “okay, so, Ben came in at number four, *despite* betraying me horribly by getting ridiculously hot, because everyone used to leave me hanging when I’d tell really bad jokes as a kid, as was their right, and their duty. And then we all met Ben, and sweet, respectful Ben - that’s right - you heard me right, he’s hot, *and* he’s respectful - I don’t even wanna talk about this anymore, Jesus fucking Christ - okay - Ben here, never

left me hanging.”

“Like, even on my worst jokes. In high school, Ben, Stan, Bill, and I had biology together, so, you can imagine - I was a fucking nightmare with all that material just being handed to me, and they start on that ‘*if you’re sexually active*,’ bullshit stuff, right? We had to fill out anonymous surveys, and Ben asked me ‘what do you put if you’ve never been sexually active before?’ And he was so earnest - so sweet - kind, humble, Ben, looking at us for support, and I open my stupid Trashmouth, and ask, ‘you’ve never been sexually active?’ and he shook his head at me, and - you know, me being myself, I tell him, ‘man, I was sexually active at twelve.’ He looked so genuinely alarmed on my behalf, and before anyone could fucking stop me, I said, ‘and by twelve-fifteen, my arm was killing me!’ - go ahead, pity-laugh at that first.”

The Losers, and the audience all appreciate Richie’s self-deprecation, and he indulges them.

“Yeah - I was the worst. All the time. I fuckin’ lifted my arm, though, to get a high-five for that bad, bad joke, and Ben Hanscom high-fived me. The true MVP. That joke was bad, it was a bad joke, it was a joke that, like most of my jokes - Stan would agree - belonged in the dumpster, but I said it to Ben, at Ben’s expense, and innocent of any wrong-doing ever, Ben will never have back the minute I stole from his life for that really bad joke about me jerking off, and he fuckin’ high-fived me anyway. He’s a hero.”

People begin applauding between the laughter, and Richie shuts them down, “no - stop clapping for him. He gets validated enough. I’m still mad that he’s as hot as he is. Stop clapping. No more clapping for Ben. He gets to wake up everyday, and look in the mirror, and see that face - choirs of Angels sing when he fuckin’ bats his pretty eyes open in the morning, okay? No more applause for Ben. Hot-Shame Ben, in fact. Shame him for his hotness any chance you get. And, since I know you’re all wondering, the answer is yes, he smells amazing. I don’t even wanna know what cologne or aftershave he uses, because I don’t wanna be that guy that goes out and buys it, like, hoping I will also be attractive in some way? I’m not doing it. He smells like he does wood-working, but also owns Oxfords. That’s what he smells like. Hot like burning, and smells like success. *Moving*

on!”

Clicking the remote, the collage shifts into one of Mike, also photos of varying ages, and with heart stickers everywhere.

“This is Mike Hanlon, and he is one of the toughest motherfuckers on the planet. I don’t even have a joke for that - Mike Hanlon is an American treasure, that’s it. That’s literally the entire idea here, no joke. Mike is a solid dude - he never liked my jokes, and good for him, I’m glad he’s like, balanced, emotionally, and psychologically, and whatever - whatever it takes to not find me funny - he is just dashing good looks, muscle for days, and tough as fucking nails. I’m not mad at him for being hot, though, because he was always hot. That wasn’t, like, a hard truth I had to come to terms with, the way I did with Ben who abandoned me in the un-date-able pool. Mike was always hot. So, what can I say is so funny about Mike, right? I liked calling him Mikey, Mickey, Mickey Mouse, Mac, and Homeschool, cause, you know, it used to be fun to name people after their insecurities -”

Richie sighs deeply into the mic, a groan that seems to encompass all of his feelings about having been problematic.

“Anyway, while I was being a shithead, and thinking about fuck-all most days, Mac the Knife fuckin’ stole shit - and I don’t mean shoplifting. I don’t mean Mikey here raged against the machine, and fought The Man. I don’t mean pick-pocketing, or cheap sleight of hand either. I mean *disturbing ancient burial grounds* kind of stealing.”

The audience laughs nervously, and Mike starts mumbling, “oh, God, he better fucking not -”

“I’m not at liberty to say what it is I know Mike stole, because he would one-hundred percent get arrested if I did.”

The Losers and audience burst into laughter again, and Richie smiles, “I’m serious! Look at him! Look at that face! Even as a kid, he was so no-nonsense, you know? I thought ‘wow, now that’s someone whose authority I *absolutely* respect, and I can’t think of *anything* that would *ever* change that,’ and then - then some cool, traumatic stuff happened, we bonded, some important aspects of his personality

were brought to light, and I was like, ‘hey - I think you may have stolen some sacred items from a certain indigineous people here, Mickey Mouse,’ and Mike was mostly like, ‘that’s so interesting you bring that up, because fucking shut your Trashmouth, Richie.’”

Staggering backwards as if struck, Richie lets the mic dangle from his hand loosely, and the theatre erupts with laughter.

After giving the audience time to calm down again, Richie runs a hand through his hair, and continues, “listen, Mike Hanlon could be fully trusted with the well-being of a butterfly. I’m not even joking. He once rescued a spider from my living room while I was determined to end its life - which - I think that’s fair game. If I wander into someone else’s house, and just start making myself at home, I’m at risk of getting *shot* - I do not understand why people get so upset about me applying the same principle to a spider, with my shoe. It’s really that simple. Come into *my* house with more than four legs? Four legs is the max at my house, okay? Anything with more than that is at risk of being killed on-sight, but that is also very dependent on size, and other contextual information, like, if a six-legged creature is in my house, and it’s two feet long, and like, a foot high, why is it there, what demon have I summoned, is it nighttime, and do I have a shotgun? It doesn’t matter, actually, because the point remains the same - anything with more than four legs is not permitted in my house - but that’s the kind of dude Mike Hanlon is. He’s faced so much adversity, and bullshit his entire life, and it’s just made him kinder. He’s all ‘be kind, be gentle, life is hard, don’t shut out the kindness of your soul,’ but *also!* -” the audience’s laughter nearly drowns Richie out, and Richie grins at them, speaking loudly into the mic, “Also! Mike is a little bit also like ‘I can, and *will*, leave this private, religious ceremony with a ritually significant talisman that was hanging around the Shaman’s neck when we arrived, and no, I will not be taking questions, or criticisms.’ Fucking amazing.”

Richie takes a long drink from his water as the audience applauds for Mike.

“I’m so glad you guys are so supportive of what could very possibly be classified as a hate-crime. I love it. I love that you guys love Mike how much *I* love Mike. And if none of you ever see me again after this show, it’s because Mike killed me, and you know what? Good for



him.”

Laughing along with everyone else, Richie clicks the remote, and up pops a collage of Beverly through the years, covered in sparkle emojis, fist emojis, and kissy faces.

He smiles warmly at it, then back at the audience.

“This here is Beverly Marsh. If life were a video-game, I’d choose her as my avatar. She is one *hot* mamajama, but also, definitely who I’d want on my side if the zombie apocalypse hits. She is fucking *fire*, okay? She’s the personification of the ‘one-hundred,’ emoji. She is. And this - I’m gonna get serious here, so buckle in - my friends and me? We call each other the Losers Club. We have since we were all like, eleven years old. We met Beverly later - at thirteen, and fourteen, and you know what? We could’ve all been born Losers, capital ‘L,’ but Beverly wore that name prouder, and louder than any of us.”

Pointing up at the collage, Richie expands, “she loves so fully, so shamelessly, and she is so fucking awesome, I can’t even describe. I think she’s so high up on my list of heroes, honestly, because she *chose* to be a Loser. She didn’t have to be. She’s clearly way hotter and more competent than the rest of us schmucks -” the audience laughs, and Beverly tries, but fails to catch Richie’s eye, “but she is the glue that held us together. I’m not joking. She came into the game way later - some of us had known each other since kindergarten, you know - she was late to the game, but she *is* the common denominator. Cause we would *all* kill and die for this woman, I swear - she is a queen, and she’s my hero, because she chose to be Loser.”

“That’s pretty wild. She chose this - she chose all of it - she saw us, a bunch of fucking misfits, and she thought, ‘I am actually totally cool with identifying with all of you.’ Beverly Marsh is the sister I never had. I thought being a Loser was just my lot in life - the cards I was dealt, you know? Beverly Marsh made me *proud* to be a Loser. I am a lifelong member of the Losers Club, and if there are any wonky, stammering, gangly, awkward, asymmetrical oddballs out here tonight, or people who just never found their tribe, so to speak, Beverly Marsh will tell you exactly where you belong, and you’ll

believe her. You're a Loser, and we welcome you warmly."

A hearty round of applause bounces off the walls, and Richie bows a little at the waist.

He takes another drink of water, and straightens his jacket.

"I bummed cigarettes off Bev in ninth grade, I once tried to tickle her and she fractured my wrist, and even first meeting, we got on famously - clearly, we were kindred spirits from the start. Truth be told, I find it hard to make fun of Bev. I once angrily referred to her as Molly Ringwald, but -" the audience laughs, and Richie gives a soft chuckle, " - yeah, that - no, I mean, it was funny to me at the time, but the punchline is 'she's beautiful,' which, like, yeah. So, I have one remotely funny thing to say about Beverly Marsh, and this is it; I've heard it said before that a pessimist sees a dark tunnel - that'd be me, and Stan. An optimist sees light at the end of the tunnel, and that'd be Bill, and Ben. A realist sees a freight train coming right for them, and that'd be Mike, but the train driver just sees a bunch of fucking idiots standing on train tracks - and that, my friends, would be Beverly Marsh. She's driving the fucking train, and always has been, and thank whatever powers that be for that, because she's saved my dumb ass from getting squashed more times than I can count. Give her a round of applause - Beverly Marsh, a woman I do not recommend trying to tickle."

Once the audience has calmed again, Richie clicks the remote, and up for the world to see is an enormous collage of Eddie, more detailed, and more serious than the collages before - no emojis.

A lot of the photos look like candid - possibly polaroids that Richie had scrounged up himself.

"This is my personal hero, my number one - Eddie Kaspbrak - he's the one that couldn't make it tonight."

The audience boos, and laments for him, but Richie shakes his head, and waves them down; something about his demeanor changes, though, as he tells them, "it's fine. I guess he'll hear this eventually. Maybe not. I don't know if anyone will be willing to air this thing after this. I don't even know if I'll ever work again in this industry

after this. I... I, uh..."

Shifting uncomfortably, Richie switches his mic-holding hand, runs a hand through his hair, clearly fumbling, as he manages to say, "so, I... I mean... listen - uhm... so... I'm gay."

There's a steep pause, as if the Earth has shifted on its axis - the room takes on the feeling one has when they've very nearly missed a step while going downstairs in the dark - and then an eruption of applause begins, absolutely deafening.

The Losers all look to each other - Richie looks pale, nervous, and with a single look, seeing how unwilling he is to look at their section anymore, and the terrified gleam to his eyes, they know it's not a joke. There won't be a punchline to that sentence, no follow-up, no set-up, even - it's a single truth.

Stan says over the noise of the crowds, "I knew it. I knew he'd come out - this is why he wanted us all here! Stand up!"

Everyone follows Stan's instructions, and soon all of Radio City Hall is on their feet, whistling, cheering, whooping, crying out, and applauding, and Beverly's eyes start to water at seeing Richie quickly wipe away a tear from his cheek.

She knows she's not the only one to see his hand shake around the mic.

"Wow. Okay - thank you. Thank you, all of you - I have not said that outside a therapist's office before, so -"

The applause gets louder, there are people screaming out, 'we love you, Richie!' in unison, and Richie, clearly compromised, turns his back to the audience, a hand on his hip, and trembling with breaths the mic only just picks up.

It takes a beat, but once he's gathered himself, he faces the theatre again, holding himself a little differently.

The celebration doesn't really stop for a long time.

"Guys - guys, I gotta get through the set," Richie laughs wetly, "I

gotta - let me talk about Eddie. I mean, I'll expound on that really significant thing I just said, but also, we have limited time left."

Gradually, people take their seats again, and the Losers sit rapt.

"I've known... I've known that I was something other than straight, since I was around nine years old. I'm not gonna lie - Bill Denbrough was my sexual awakening. Hero-worship collided with a fuck-ton of hormones, and he's so fuckin' cute with his red hair, and his stutter, and he was so nice to me, even though I was fuckin' annoying, and loud, and still am, and wowza - Bill Denbrough was my first crush on a boy, okay? But, listen, Radio City Hall, I am about to get very real with you, because I'm pretty sure I'm getting fired for going off-script, and I don't really have anything left to lose - I have never felt for *anyone* what I have felt for Edward Kaspbrak up here."

Beverly's phone is heavily silent in her pocket.

The confession that he's gone off-script for this segment implies a lot. Beverly worries that he'd not be this candid if he knew Eddie is in the audience.

Stan nods his head knowingly, and Bill smiles in awe - Mike, and Ben look as if they've been truly shocked, and Beverly can't even begin figuring out what she's feeling. If it shows on her face at all, she figures she'll ask the other Losers later, what it was she was emoting.

"Let me set the scene for you - Eddie, or as I call him, Eds, Eddie Spaghetti, Ed Head, Noodle-Caboodle, Edward Spaghetward, Spaghetti Head, Edwina, Dr. K, Spaghetti Man, and/or Edford - there will be a quiz after the show, so I hope you all got all that - Eddie is a hypochondriac... I can tell by your faces that 'hypochondriac,' was not the first thing you expected me to say. Hold on - it's relevant, I swear. Eddie is a hypochondriac, and any neighborhood housewife that served on the PTA in the early 90's, in our hometown, would tell you that Edward Kaspbrak was the sweetest, most polite young man they'd ever had the pleasure to meet. What I am here to tell you is that Eddie is, and always has been, a fucking feral badger, willing *and* able to gouge your eyes out with a spoon, and I have loved him my entire life."

Laughter and applause builds up again, and Richie laughs with them, “and you can cite me on that, okay? Eddie Kaspbrak has always been a good head shorter than me, always had perfectly coiffed hair, and every time I insulted him, or his mother - which was my totally, universally endearing way of flirting at the age of thirteen - he would snap back so fast, my head would spin. See, Eds gives it as good as he gets. It’s what I liked about him from the start. I’d say something like, ‘blah, blah, blah, me banging your mom,’ and Eddie would whip around, fucking infernos in his eyes, and say, ‘oh, that’s real funny, Rich, too bad you’ll be busy being *dead in the ground* for that joke while I *fuck your sister!*’ - which -” the audience makes astonished, and horrified laughs, “right?! Eddie goes from zero to a hundred in less than a second. He had that whole town fooled that he was just a sweet, little pumpkin pie, and in reality, he’s about as sweet as a fuckin’ cassowary.”

‘I’d be like, ‘blah, blah, projection of my insecurities, blah, blah, your mom’s fat,’ and he’d be like, ‘oh, ha-ha-ha, Richie, you’re so neat-o when you’re being an asshole,’ and he’d fool me! I’d think about how cute he was, and how I didn’t want to *actually* hurt his feelings, and I’d buckle, and be like, ‘okay, I’m sorry,’ and give him my hand to shake, or something, and he’d look me dead in the fuckin’ eyes and say shit like, ‘I will literally walk backwards into the gaping maw of Hell before I shake your unwashed hand, you Godless whore.’ I - do you guys understand what kind of person I’m talking about? He is a very special breed.”

The Losers are all bubbling with laughter again, and the audience appears to be very pro-Eddie. Stan and Mike, in particular, seem to get a big kick out of Richie’s descriptions of Eddie.

“Every summer, he’d wear these red short-shorts, you guys, and I just...” Richie, without any further explanation, crouches, and then lies down on the floor of the stage, face-down.

The theatre is a raucous echo chamber of laughter - the defeat of Richie’s entire body is so universally understood, even Patty and Audra begin hiding their grins behind their hands.

“Guys,” Richie mumbles into the mic.

The audience only laughs more.

Richie turns to face them, but doesn't move from the floor.

"Listen, these shorts... you could've shown me a dirty magazine with Pamela Anderson at the centerfold, and it would have done nothing for me. But fuckin' Eddie Kaspbrak in his itty-bitty little summer shorts - 'they're easier to keep clean, Richie!' 'I get less burs stuck on me than you and your stupid cargos!' 'They don't hang low in the grass, Richie!' - oh my God - summer into tenth grade, I don't even think I dedicated brain space to anything else. I think there's a good block of time, like a solid month - I'm gonna say August - that I thought of *literally nothing else*, except Eddie Kaspbrak in those fucking shorts. Realizing I had a crush on Bill was fine, cause I was like, ten, or something, and I wasn't gonna do anything about it because I was generally more concerned with The Power Rangers, and Bill seemed completely unattainable anyway - Bill was like Captain America, and I was like... a dude who read Captain America comics - but meeting Eddie Kaspbrak? Eddie, who returned fire *every* time I opened my mouth? Eddie, who constantly threatened to fuck my non-existent sister when I'd insult his mother? Do you get how metal that is? I feel like you guys aren't appreciating this enough."

Richie turns over onto his back, groans, and says, "Jesus, I'm getting old. Okay, listen - I don't have a sister, unless we're counting Bev here, which I do, but not in the sense that Eddie was speaking about her. So, I'd say something mean about his mother, and Eddie would say something mean back to me about a sister I didn't have. Do you get what that means? It's like, it's - Eddie was saying to me, 'you're such a piece of shit, Richie, if I could disrespect your bloodline more, by fucking your hypothetical sister, I would. If you had a sister in this world, I would go out of my way to reduce her to a sexual object, because of how much I don't respect you. Your entire bloodline should feel my wrath, for the fury you ignite in me, that's how much I fuckin' hate you.' I mean... do you guys even blame me, at this point, for carrying a torch for this dude? Who in the Hell can resist sweet-talk like *that*?"

Once the laughter dies down again, Richie tells them, still from the floor, "Eddie got pushed around a lot. He really drew a lot of short straws. He always hated pity, though, so I made sure he felt as

abused by me as everyone else was, hence the ten thousand bad nicknames I gave him. One time - one time, we were at the movies, and he accidentally knocked over his popcorn - because we sat in the balcony seats, because we all knew what was good -" Richie breaks briefly for his audience's laughter, and the balcony mezzanine seats to whistle, "- and when we saw who it landed on, we found it had landed on these really rough motherfuckers that used to beat the shit out of us as kids - like, *all* of us. He may as well have accidentally poked three Great White Sharks in the fuckin' eyeballs. Naturally, Eddie was petrified. So, in solidarity, in full view of these mean sons of bitches, I uncapped my soda, and, knowingly, intentionally, poured it down on them, because my Eds was not meant to be petrified, so if he was going down that night, by God, I'd follow him down."

Beverly whistles, Mike and Bill whoop for him, and Stan applauds him politely; the audience rewards Richie with a wave of raucous clapping.

"Thank you," Richie tells them, snorting a laugh, "Thanks. We had to run for our lives, afterward, but, whatever - worth it. Listen, I won't get into all the details, but there's one more story about Eddie I wanna share tonight. I've not told an audience the whole narrative, but I'm gonna be more honest with you all, since I've already dug my grave. When we were thirteen years old, Eddie broke his arm. We were somewhere we shouldn't have been, and he literally fell through the decrepit second floor of a defunct house, landed hard on an old table, on the *first* floor, and broke his radius clean in half."

People groan in sympathy, and Richie nods.

"Yeah. Being a hypochondriac, in a dilapidated house full of dust, dirt, grime, spiderwebs, scat, collapsing infrastructure, old needles, and shit, known for housing drug addicts, very ill homeless folks, and, for us kids, potentially, incomprehensible monsters - this was a nightmare. It was an actual nightmare for Eddie. This is what I want to tell you guys about, though - cause it's not just that Eddie faced a bunch of his fears that day, and stood up to them - that's only part of the reason he's my number one hero. The moment that shines like a diamond in my mind is coming to Eddie's side, seeing him hyperventilate, he's holding his broken arm with his other hand, and

I tell him I'm gonna set his arm for him - I tell him it's okay, which I didn't know that it would be, but I wanted him to believe me, I cared about him so much, I was already so fuckin' head over heels for this kid, and I tell him I'm gonna fix it. I have to fix it - I was a kid, I felt like it was my fault that he'd gotten hurt, cause Eddie Spaghetti is my main man, I'm supposed to look out for him, and I failed, so I have to fix it, I gotta set his arm for him, right?"

"Please, please try to go to this place with me - I'm so in love with this kid, right? I'm such an asshole to him, he's fuckin' maybe five feet tall, exactly, he has two different fannypacks for different flavors of medical emergencies, and while he's a tough, little fucker, I still have the urge to take care of him, not because I pity him, or think he's sick, but because I want him to like me back so fuckin' badly, and we're in this broken down, fuckin' haunted as fuck house, disease, asbestos, tetanus at every fuckin' turn, Eddie's down and out for the count, knocked on his ass, holding his broken arm, and I tell him I'm going to fix it for him, and you know what he says to me?"

Pausing for effect, Richie looks away from the audience, up to the ceiling, and says directly into the mic, "he says, 'do not fucking touch me.'"

The audience bursts into boisterous, ridiculous joy again, and Richie grins, flopping an arm over his forehead, gesticulating with his hand.

"He says that! He says that to me! I'm so in love with him, I'm so fucking madly in love with him, and I'm so petrified that he's hurt, that he got hurt on my watch, and I just want to do something right in my life for once, and I'm like 'I'm gonna fix this for you,' and he looks me dead in the eye, he's fuckin' crazy-eyed, running on straight up cortisol and adrenaline, enough to beat a Bengal tiger to death with his broken arm, and says 'do not fucking touch me! Do not fucking touch me, Rich!' I can hear it in my head, clear as fucking day. Jesus Christ."

Over the laughter, Richie tells them with a sigh, "I did it. I did it, anyway. I set his arm."

The laughter only becomes more rowdy at that, and Richie laughs too, uncovering his face.



“Eddie Kaspbrak is a feral badger - you’d need a fucking traffic radar to keep up with how fast his mouth moves, he talks like it’s going out of style - which I love, clearly, because I, too, love the sound of my own voice, and I had never met someone who could out-talk me before, it was mind-blowing. He is still kinda short, and he still uses an inhaler he doesn’t need, and if you catch a stomach bug, he files for a restraining order to maintain a safe distance from you, but listen...”

Richie sits up, looking at the grinning faces all around him, and he tells them, “Eddie Kaspbrak is the bravest, smartest, funniest person I’ve ever known. In his nightmare come-to-life, Eddie didn’t just face off with his own inner-demons. He looked me, his friend, in the face, and was brave enough to say, ‘do not fucking touch me.’ For a kid that got pushed around from doctor to doctor for no reason, his fucked up Munchausen Mom always hemming, and hawing over him, specialists poking and prodding, every adult he bumped into helping him part his hair better, or fold his polo shirt collar more neatly ‘cause he’s oh-so-cute, oh-so-sweet, he’s a good boy, he doesn’t mind, groomed by a psychopath to be too polite to tell them to fuck off - the kid never got a fucking break. And then, at the moment you’d think he’d fold, that he’d just collapse, and turn on autopilot to get through whatever the fuck else I was gonna put him through - the scariest moment of his life, maybe - he said what needed saying to the entire world about him. It didn’t matter that he was small, or thin, or believed he was sick, it didn’t matter that he was surrounded by everything that made him panic, that his bones were visibly shattered, it didn’t matter - none of it mattered. All that mattered was that, Hell or high water, Eddie Kaspbrak was not taking anymore shit he didn’t sign up for - not without a fight.”

Eddie’s fearlessness is cheered for, and Richie nods, and gesticulates widely with his arms to convey his agreement with their assessment.

Once it’s quiet again, Richie brings the mic back up to his mouth.

“So, yeah. He’s my hero. He’s brave, and he fights monsters, but he’s not scared to fight his friends either - when the time of truth arrived, Eddie said, ‘no.’ And it didn’t mean, ‘don’t fucking touch me, because I hate you, or because I don’t trust you,’ - it was this ‘I recognize you mean well, but if anything else goes wrong for me today, I’m liable to

kill someone.' So, thank God I set it right."

After a few beats of laughter, Richie leans his weight on his thighs, quiet, and contemplative, and then tells them all, "that's my closer, usually. I'm not brave like Eddie is - I don't usually say shit that really means anything, especially to the people it would matter most to. I... I immortalized my feelings for him by carving our initials into the Kissing Bridge almost thirty years ago, in our hometown, and never told a soul about it until right fucking now. That's how scared shitless I am."

The theatre is quiet, and so is Beverly's phone

"I get up on stage, I name my show after something brave *he* said, because *I've* never been a modicum as brave as he was in that moment, and that's my hero. Eddie's my fucking hero. First, forever, and always. If I had a moment of glory like that, a moment of historic courage, and monumental, personal growth, I don't know *what* I'd say. Maybe, at the time, I'd say something like, 'don't look at me so closely.' Cause that's the shit I really wanted to say, my whole life, cause I was terrified of people knowing me in any meaningful way - that's why I perform. It's all an optical illusion, it's all to keep you looking one way, staring at the dancing monkey, and constantly repeating, 'don't look at the man behind the curtain.' It's one big joke, chucks for days, you just don't know that the joke's on you."

The silence is tangible.

"I know you didn't sign up for a fuckin' Ted Talk, I know - I'm probably gonna lose my job after this, who knows if this will even air because of the road I've taken you all down, I mean, Netflix, and Radio City Hall wanted to monetize my complete meltdown six months ago by giving me a gorgeous, opulent chance at a huge comeback, and I've totally fucked all this up... but listen, even if you're the only people that ever hear it - I barely know myself. I was so busy trying to be liked, trying to be funny, trying to stay safe in a backwards, small town in the 90's, and hiding who I really was, that I never actually got to know anything about who Richie Tozier *is*. I'm forty, and I'm only just getting to know him *now*. That shit sucks. So, listen up, because I'm being serious - hug your best friends while you can, even if they hate how tight you make it, because, when push

comes to shove, they will risk their lives to get you ice cream; and you never know if someone you love is gonna try to check out early either, so just - just hold them. Every chance you get.”

He looks out to the audience, his eyes shining behind his glasses, and continues, “it’s okay to hero-worship your friends a little bit, too - find people you want to emulate, and follow them, wherever they point - keep saying ‘yes,’ even when it’s scary, even when you wish they had less of a moral compass, and especially if they’re cute.”

Richie allows for a small laughter to rise from the audience again, but his smile is sweet, and sincere, almost private. The mood is intimate.

“Appreciate the folks that appreciate you - even when you tell really bad jokes about jerking off - if there’s one person in the room willing to high-five you for it, thank them, and be good to them, because they’re being good to you too. Be fair, and kind to your friends that face adversity you know nothing about - respect them, respect their struggles, and they’ll respect you, and yours - and you New Yorkers already know, snitches get stitches, so get good at keeping juicy secrets.”

The audience laughs again and Richie adds, “listen to the women in your life, they’re usually just trying to keep you from getting run over by trains - they’re all beautiful, they’re all worthy of love, and they will fracture your wrists, but it’ll keep you from pushing your luck in the future. You’ll be better for them - just by being near them. And... be brave.”

Gazing out into the audience reverently, Richie sits up straighter, and pretzels his legs.

“Life’s short. Like, way shorter than you’re conceptualizing, and so much of the good shit in life, the shit you want, the shit worth having - it requires bravery to get, and to keep. The truth is, most of the time, I don’t wanna be funny. I don’t wanna make jokes, or poke fun, but it’s *all* I know how to do, so I do it for you all, because I’m fucked up in the head, and I think that love is something you have to earn, because my parents barely acknowledged my existence my whole life, so I just keep giving you all pieces of what I think myself is, and one day I’ll run out of whoever Richie Tozier is, whatever I’ve made him

up to be, and I really, really hope I find out who that is, underneath it all, when I run out of all the weird papier-mâché shit I've covered him up with. If I fall off the map after this show, that's fine - I'm taking a back road, don't worry about me. I'm gonna figure out who I am, what that means, and for the sake of the Losers Club, in honor of my heroes, I'll try to be brave."

Richie clicks the remote without turning away from the audience, and their old polaroid from the mall pops up, beside a picture they all had taken together, only six months beforehand.

It's almost jarring, to see how they've aged, but still all look very much the same.

The love between them all is most evident.

"I wrote this show for six Losers - capital 'L.' They're my heroes. They make me wanna be better, smarter, funnier, *awake* - they make me braver than I actually am, and I hope they're your heroes now too - they deserve the recognition. Heroes are all around you. That's the truth. I hope you enjoyed tonight. I hope you all enjoy most nights, actually. Most days, too. I hope your lives are full to the brim with good people, and good food, and good cheer, and laughter, and pushing, and swimming, and bike-racing, and all that shit. I hope you never run out of reasons to be brave."

Standing up, Richie brushes off his knees, and tells the room, "so, I don't know what it means yet, but I'm Richie Tozier, and tonight's been a fucking blessing. You've been an emotionally taxing blast, New York. Thank you."

The room is instantly an intense, roar of noise, people flying to their feet, the applause sounding like thunder, and quakes, and Richie grins as his outro music plays; before departing the stage, he leans into the mic one last time, and tells them, "and, welcome to the Losers Club, New York."

The noise of the audience drowns out everything else, and it goes on long after Richie has made his last wave to the theatre, and gone backstage. Even as the houselights come up, the chanting, the pounding of feet, and hands, and whistling, and madness goes on for

a full five minutes.

When the theatre has (eventually) emptied, the Losers look to each other, mostly at a loss, and in their Earth shaken silence, Stan's the first to look over. He looks across the aisle, and spots Eddie, sitting there, alone, and shellshocked, two rows up.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Stan murmurs.

## 2. The Reception

### Notes for the Chapter:

Explicit Sex Scene Ahead! Sex-specific warnings have been added to the tags! Enjoy! <3

“So, you knew he was on the fence about going, because he was anxious? About seeing Richie again? And when he decided he was definitely going to go, you decided not to tell Richie because you thought... it’d be funny... to give Eddie a chance to heckle him?”

“It was funnier when we planned it,” Bev tries to explain, in the same tone of voice Richie often used to say ‘that was funnier in my head.’

“I thought there’d be a good opening,” Eddie defends himself, gesturing around at the Losers, “I thought he’d rag on me about my mother, or something - he’s always been so predictable! I thought I’d get a chance to yell at him to fuck off, and he’d hear my voice, and, you know, be all heartened or whatever that I actually *did* show up - I even texted Bev during his opening jokes when he accused me of not showing up whether or not I should make myself known right then, but she didn’t answer!”

“Your phone was supposed to be off for the show, though,” Audra inserts.

“I know!” Eddie says defiantly, “I’m a fast typist, though, and my screen is set to the lowest lighting because exposure to blue and white light all day can really damage your eyes, and I even texted from inside my sweater - I wasn’t gonna disturb anyone! The point is, I thought I’d give him a Tozier-style Obnoxious Entrance, the way he always did to me, you know? And it... well, I hate saying this phrase, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Stan looks disapprovingly between Beverly and Eddie, and then glares at Ben.

“And you approved of this?”

“Approval is a strong word.”

“You did nothing to stop it.”

“Stan, I’m so glad we’re just now meeting - please, let me introduce you to my wife, Beverly Marsh, perhaps in getting to know her, you will realize I had no power to stop this from happening.”

Rolling his eyes, Stan goes to argue more with them all, when another voice pipes up.

“I’m worried,” Patty announces, voicing what everyone else is thinking, “It’s been a long while since the theatre cleared out. He should be out by now.”

“He j-just *came out* to Radio City Hall - and it was *p-packed*,” Bill says, “I have to imagine he has PR guys, r-right? I mean, the only s-social media account he ac-tually runs himself is his Twitter, and even th-that, they have to d-delete shit he says. They’re p-probably losing their minds about this.”

“Well, it’s not like he was offensive in any way,” Patty mentions hopefully, gesturing a bit at Bill, “He didn’t make his coming out a joke, and he got awfully sincere after that, which I thought was rather a wonderful gift to give an audience. There’s a comedian my nephew loves that does shows like that - Bo Burnham. He says that he likes the ‘existential dread,’ Mr. Burnham inserts at the end of his shows. I can’t imagine this is too unlike that - they could always spin it.”

“He did want to rebrand himself,” Mike mentions, agreeing with Patty, “His writers used to give him a lot of misogynistic jokes and shit, though - I’m thinking he’ll survive this stunt, but he could be in major trouble. No matter what, his audience demographic is definitely changed after this, and none of the people in charge of keeping him employed had prepared for that. If the Netflix execs don’t like how he did the special - and, I’m talking out of my ass here, I don’t know shit about show business - but I’d assume they have the power to dissolve his contract.”

“They would,” Bill tells him with more certainty, “This was a b-big

deal - not just because it was his Netflix s-special, but b-because it was a c-comeback. They got him a pr-pretty enviable venue, which can't be ch-cheap, tons of advertising, a-and they must've made a lot of stipulations in the contracts for him to b-be using *full* n-names of r-real people, real photographs, and stuff. If the execs don't like it, he c-could lose the Netflix deal, and if he loses that, his agent is out a lot of m-money, as are the p-people above him. Richie r-realistically could get d-dropped by his agency for this."

"He's smart, though - a lot smarter than any of us ever gave him due credit for," Mike reminds Bill, "He must have known that. He's no risk analyst, but he has to have known what he was doing. I mean, we all watched him struggle for a while up there - he was probably worried about the gamble he was making, but figured that the gamble was worth it."

"Richie has always been more trouble than he's worth," Eddie grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest.

"On the contrary," Stan tells him, "Richie has always been precisely the correct amount of trouble to be worthwhile. I'm not saying the ratio didn't dip in and out of his favor at times, but generally speaking, Richie has always been *just* worth the trouble he is."

Everyone smiles at Stan, and he nods in Eddie's direction, "and what the Hell are you gonna do now?"

"Huh?"

"He said all of that because he thought his special was getting canceled - he said that, like, five times, before he even came out," Stan elaborates, "He got so heavy at the end there - and, bear in mind, I'm saying this as someone who has been friends with him since before he could tie his shoes - because he thought you *weren't here*, and that you'd *never* hear it. So, do we pretend you never heard it, you weren't here, or are we all coming clean?"

Sniffing a little, Eddie isn't sure what to say.

He rubs at the bottom of his nose a little, because it's sensitive from having snorted out soda, laughing at Richie's monologue about Stan.



Everyone is looking to him for direction; he suddenly feels very sorry for having done this to Bill their entire lives.

He's considering telling them to lie - tell Richie he really never showed up, and he'll surprise them at the bar, and apologize for coming in late from a flight, but just as he's about to do that, Stan's phone beeps loudly, and several times in a row.

He checks it, and reads it aloud to the group, "it's from Richie. 'Sorry, stuck doing damage control with agents, people are always yelling at me, I should've had more to drink, a lot of suits that wanna see me die violently back here. No hatchets backstage - tell Mike I might need back-up. You all can go to Five Napkin without me to eat, I'll meet you there ASAP.' Oh, like Hell I'd go anywhere after that. He's insane!"

"Well, we all knew th-that," Bill jokes lightly, shifting in his seat, "Ask him w-what he wants us to do - like, w-what he *really* wants us to do, not what he th-thinks we want him to say."

"How about I tell him we're just not going anywhere without him, since he's gonna tell us to leave anyway?" Stan offers.

"Tell him I'm here."

All eyes fall to Eddie, but he's very focused on his shoes.

"Tell him I thought his cellphone joke over the P.A was shit."

Snorting, Stan smirks, and types something out on his phone.

Maybe twenty seconds after he's sent it, they all hear something crash backstage, and all of them laugh.

Looking at his phone, Stan reads out, "I think he just fell off something. That, or he just threw his phone - he must have hit his camera button, he sent me a picture of - uh - nothing discernible. It's blurry, I don't think he meant to send it. Now he's typing - wait."

A beat passes.

"No."

“What?” Bill asks.

Stan laughs, and repeats, “no. He just wrote back ‘no.’”

Raising his phone, he snaps a quick picture of Eddie, and sends it off, with a text he doesn’t disclose to the group.

After a few seconds of waiting, they hear shouting, doors closing and opening, a trashcan possibly being upended, and then, looking flushed, and ridiculous, Richie comes skidding out on to the stage.

It amazes Eddie that, just a short while ago, Richie had seemed too big for that stage - his smile alone had been too enormous for these halls to cater to. The all of him, his boisterous, playful energy, his childhood, his memories, his adulthood, his *self* had dimmed the exuberance of Radio City Hall’s largest platform, but now he seemed so small.

Richie Tozier was an inch or so over six feet, with broad shoulders, and strong, long arms he’d properly grown into, just as Bev had promised he would. It should be silly, to think of him as small, to look at him, and see something other than the supernova he’s always been, but Eddie sees him.

He’s breathless, because his lungs are too human, his chest is expanding and collapsing, because his torso is too constricting for all his enormity. His legs are holding him up fine for the time being, but it seems as if Eddie blew some air in the direction of his knees, he might just wobble and collapse.

His eyes are so round, glistening with so much, and he’s so human. He’s so plainly a man in panic, and it’s painfully endearing.

There are two very well-groomed men in suits following him, but they follow his stare to Eddie, seeming to recognize him immediately.

Richie’s so visibly nervous, Eddie swears he can see Richie’s actual heart beating against his ribcage through his shirt.

He watches Richie’s big, clumsy hands clench, and unclench by his sides, as he stares wide-eyed, and wonders when it is that Richie shifted from charmingly annoying, to annoyingly charming.

“You’re here,” he says softly.

Suddenly, Eddie’s fourteen years old again, seeing Richie all dressed up for his cousin’s wedding, and having that forbidden thought - that he’s so handsome, that he’s dreamy - having that forbidden impulse - to lean in, kiss his cheek, loop their arms, and let Richie take him on a date that would be more like a comedy tour. And probably wind up at the arcade like any ordinary day, anyway.

“I’m here,” Eddie confirms.

“You’ve been here since - ?”

“You favor the right side of the theatre, shithead - that’s rude, you know,” Eddie tells him through a smile, “I thought you might have seen me when you brought the house lights up, but you missed me - you were looking in the wrong direction.”

“You saw the entire thing?” Richie asks raggedly.

“I saw the entire thing.”

“You really heard the P.A thing?”

“It was some of your worst work.”

The Losers chuckle, and Richie snorts a laugh, looking torn between childlike wonder, and abject horror.

Eddie thinks the expression is a very good summation of their time together.

“You do a good Gene Wilder impression, though.”

Richie wipes what must be sweaty palms on the front of his tight jeans, and nods nonsensically.

“And, I’ll admit - hearing you roast everybody *else* for once was pretty cathartic. I was a big fan of your Ben and Mike bits.”

“Hey, fuck you,” Mike laughs, punching Eddie’s arm, while Ben hides behind his hand again.

“You laughed?”

A quiet falls over them all, and it feels like a cat sleeping - soft, vulnerable, small - it curls around them, and Eddie hasn't broken eye-contact with Richie for a moment.

“I laughed so hard, I burned my nostrils with soda, and when you talked about Stan's dad, I laughed so hard I cried, Richie.”

“So, you... you liked it? I made you laugh?”

Smiling sweetly, Eddie decides he likes whatever side of Richie this is.

Maybe Richie left whatever remained of the papier-mâché Richie Tozier on stage, and this is what's been beneath.

He doesn't really remember Richie ever caring whether or not he made people laugh - his methodology was very concentrated on success being measured by output. It was always quantity over quality, just constant production, and if something worked, it would be revisited, and tailored for varying contexts, but quality rarely mattered, so long as his mouth kept moving.

This Richie, this grown-up he's learning to know all over again - this one cares if Eddie really thought his show was any good. He cares that Eddie laughed, and he seems so hungry for the validation, Eddie's nearly tempted to dangle it in front of him before bestowing it, just to keep him so lovely, and exposed.

Eddie's never had a cruel bone in his body, though.

“I loved it, Richie. It was perfect. And, yeah. I don't think I've laughed that hard in... I don't know. Something like thirty years.”

Smiling broadly, Richie seems to finally begin breathing again, huffing out a half-laugh, his eyes glassy.

“Rich, this is already all over Twitter,” a suit tells him, “What move are we making here?”

“I don't care,” Richie tells him, not looking away from Eddie, “Do

whatever you want. Fire me. It's fine."

"It is not fine!" Eddie admonishes, planting his hands on his hips, "No - you are not getting fired, Richie. New York was the exact correct venue to do this in, you chose a liberal, theatrical state, and city, and they were thrilled. You might get some push back from your old demographics that you weren't even writing for, yourself, but those aren't the fans you wanted anyway, right?"

"Yeah," Richie agrees, "It's just - I have a contract -"

"Fuck the contract," Eddie tells him sternly, "I have connections. Most of my life has been networking with people that draw up, and dismantle contracts in their sleep - you find yourself out on your ass tomorrow morning, I'll help you figure out where to go from there, okay? It's gonna be fine."

"Is it?"

Everyone knows that Richie isn't referring to his career.

"Is it?" Richie asks quietly again, looking only at Eddie, "Is it really gonna be fine?"

Hesitating for too long, Eddie feels Stan push him in the back, urging him to answer.

"Richie..."

"I mean - your wife - what if your wife sees it?" Richie questions, looking twitchy, dropping eye-contact, "If this *does* somehow fucking work in my favor, and they air the special, someone's bound to tell your wife, even if she never sees it herself, I was only thinking of myself up there, I didn't even think about her, so I mean -"

"I don't have a wife."

It's as if all the air is sucked out of the theatre at once.

Richie blinks a few times, and then asks, "you don't have a wife?"

"I currently do not have a wife."

“No wife?”

Crossing his arms again, Eddie smiles at Richie, flexing his naked, left hand on his bicep for emphasis, and parrots, “no wife.”

“Oh,” Richie mumbles dumbly.

“So, dinner?”

“Really?”

Eddie allows himself a small laugh, and then reminds him, “we’re all waiting on you, dipshit. Are we all going, or what?”

“Oh!” Richie jumps, nudging his glasses up his nose, “Right. Uh, yeah. I mean, I won’t know what comes next til the Netflix dudes see it anyway, so, I may as well live it up while I can. I gotta go backstage again, though.”

“What? Why?” Eddie asks.

“I need to change clothes, dude.”

“You actually look decent for once, why would you change?”

“Deeply flattering, thanks so much, Eds, but actually I’m referring to the twelve gallons of sweat I’m soaking in right now, because, believe it or not, having ten million theatre lights honed in on you makes everything a little toasty. No amount of cologne could excuse what’s going on over here.”

Scrunching his face up in disgust, Eddie says, “ugh, you’re so gross. Yeah. Definitely change.”

“Yeah - I... okay.”

Richie turns to go, the suits following him, and Stan shoves Eddie forward aggressively, startling a noise from him that Richie turns to.

“What?”

“Uh -” Eddie fumbles, his left hand going for the silver watch on his

right wrist, anything to busy himself, “Can I - can I come with you?”

“Like, downstairs? To the dressing room?”

“Yes?” Eddie checks with Stan that this is what he was shoved for; Stan nods to him.

“Yeah,” Richie answers, “Yeah, we, uh... we should probably talk.”

Nodding, Eddie follows him, and the rest of the Losers kick back, watching them go.

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The underground of Radio City Hall is cavernous, enormous, and glamorous. There are areas that are less controlled, full of autographs made directly onto the walls, covered with posters, aged ads for upcoming shows, and there are walls dedicated to perfectly framed photographs, art deco, and rooms full of makeup, wigs, costumes - it's unlike anything Eddie's ever seen in New York, before. Then again, Eddie never took much interest in New York's theatre life.

As he looks around, Eddie can't help imagining hundreds of Rockettes rushing about the halls through the years in glittering dresses, clicking heels, and bold stage makeup. There's something historic, and wholesome about the entire thing.

“Can you even imagine the amount of coke that was done down here? There are ghosts of piles of cocaine down here. I feel like I can smell it.”

Sighing long-sufferingly, Eddie banishes the family-friendly daydream he had been having, and stares at the back of Richie's head; Richie's staying a good three, or four paces in front of him. Eddie can't tell if that's on purpose or not.

“Not what I was thinking, but sure, you're probably right.”

“Probably? I'm *definitely* right. That's the go-to for late night

showmen like me, you know, even though I gave that shit up a long time ago. One night, at a club, like, way earlier in my career, I was doing stand-up with a couple other comedians at a tiny little club in Tampa, and one of them said to me, 'I'm fuckin' exhausted,' and I agreed, cause, yeah, and he said, 'fuck black coffee, and fuck coke - I want whatever theatre kids take that makes them the way they are in the mornings.' We laughed, but I told him, 'they don't take anything - they're clinically anxious, and/or gay. Makes 'em hustle.'"

"Is that why you think I was so high-energy as a kid?"

"Was?" Richie doesn't miss a beat, "Dude, you were going eighty just sitting at Jade of the Orient. I think the only real diagnosis you have, that you never got, was ADHD. I'm not even being a dick about it, either - you're as high-strung as high-strung gets, and you hyperfixate."

"Like you don't?"

"That's fair, but I don't wear polo shirts."

"What? What the fuck do my polo shirts have to do with this?"

"Kids with attention deficits wear polo shirts."

"What the fuck are you even talking about?!"

"It's a pattern I've noticed! Haven't you ever noticed? Remember that kid we went to elementary school with that pretended he was a squirrel through fuckin' fifth grade, and he was, like, actually kind of good at it? Roleplay for kids is developmentally normal, I'm not shitting on that, I just mean the *squirrel* part - he picked the twitchiest, fastest, most 'I am condensed, tightly packed kinetic energy,' type of animal, and he was *good* at it. And he wore polo shirts."

"I swear, Richie, I follow maybe half of your streams of logic."

"That's generous."

"It is - but what about you? You're not so condensed, I guess, but you're wired, and walk too fast."



Visibly slowing down, Richie turns a corner, and replies, “well, I’m gay. *And* clinically anxious. So. I walk fast.”

Eddie waits a beat to ask, “was that scary to say?”

“Yeah,” Richie replies with a sigh, still not looking at him, “but I’m getting used to it. I’ll get the hang of it eventually. Trying to be brave, and like, authentic and whatever now, I gotta start somewhere. Anyway, I wasn’t a theatre kid growing up, but I had the anxiety, and the homosexuality down, so.”

“And I wore polo shirts.”

Snorting a laugh, Richie confirms, “you *still* wear polo shirts, Eds. But yeah, you wore polo shirts, and you maybe had something that kept hyperactivity as a close friend.”

“Don’t discount my clinical anxiety, either.”

“Ah, fuck, that’s right - we all got traumatized around the same time. Well, you came into the game anxious, as I recall. Like, I don’t make enough serotonin because my genetics suck, and then trauma made my body produce way too much cortisol, and your genetics wrote code to over-produce cortisol, and then trauma ended all your serotonin production, so, we really complemented each other well.”

“And I’m gay.”

“And you’re -” Richie stops dead in his tracks, partway through the threshold of an oversized dressing room, and Eddie bumps into his back, stumbling a step back.

“Ow! Watch it, dickwad!”

“You’re what?” Richie asks, turning to face him.

“Gay,” Eddie repeats, rubbing his nose, “Why are your shoulder-blades like fucking concrete? Warn a guy if you’re gonna slam on the fucking brakes, dude, I was right behind you.”

“You’re gay?”

“Yes, Richie,” Eddie answers, “I don’t wanna do interviews about this right now, so just take notes - yes, I’ve known for a while, don’t know how long, just long enough that I definitely knew my marriage was a sham when I went into it, but I didn’t stop it, because that seemed like more work than it was worth. I had a clean break from Myra because we got prenups done, she doesn’t know about me being gay, even if she did, she wouldn’t accept it, so it doesn’t do to try and convince her of anything, and I got prenups because I’m a risk analyst, and statistics for successful marriages at the time I got married were pretty poor, so I did what logically made sense to me. When I got home from Derry, I dismantled everything I’ve built over the last, like, decade, and just - started over, and now I’m here.”

“You... are you okay?”

Pausing in astonishment, Eddie drops his hand from rubbing his nose, and stares up at Richie.

“No one’s asked me that.”

“Okay... well... I am.”

“Yeah,” Eddie acknowledges, swallowing a lump in his throat, “I - yes. I’m okay. She was... she was pretty awful to me, Richie.”

Fascinated, Eddie watches Richie’s jaw clench, and something eager for love bumps around in his chest at watching Richie reign in his fury. He always did, just a little bit, deep down, like when Richie got possessive/protective over him.

“And I don’t have ADHD. I’m just a master multi-tasker. I’m like Spock.”

“Are you fucking kidding?” Richie asks, outraged, “*I*’m like Spock - you’re not like Spock! I’m like Spock!”

“How in the fuck are you more like Spock than me?”

“Okay, Spock is gay, first and foremost -”

“We’re both gay!”

“I was gay first!”

“You can’t fuckin’ prove that! That’s not even a thing!”

“Fine! But I said it first!”

“That doesn’t *mean* anything!”

“I have the black hair! And I had a bad bowl cut for like, so much of our adolescence!”

“So!? You think Spock wouldn’t wear polos?”

“No, he wouldn’t!”

“Well, he sure as Hell wouldn’t wear Hawaiian Dad Shirts, and band-t’s!”

“Fine, but I have glasses.”

“Spock didn’t wear glasses?!”

“No, but Spock was smart, like, smarter than the on-board computers, so, like -”

“What does that have to do with glasses!?”

“Having glasses means I’m smart!”

“No, they don’t! They mean you’re a traffic risk! You’re a dumbass, Richie!”

Breaking, Richie holds his gut and laughs out hysterically.

Richie’s laugh has always been contagious, and now that they’re all grown up, it’s no different; Richie laughs, and Eddie starts laughing too.

He watches the way Richie’s shoulders hunch up high, how his eyes crinkle, his lopsided smile is so charming, and it does something so silly, and so fun to Eddie’s stomach, he can’t help but laugh just as hard.

Once they've calmed down, Richie smiles down at him, and says, "come on inside. I've got normal clothes to change into for dinner."

"Normal?" Eddie inquires, closing the door behind them, "I think you like fine."

"Yeah, so you've said," Richie laughs, moving across the changing room to a pile of clothes on the tabletop.

The table is shaped like an 'L,' and lined with lights, and mirrors. There's makeup bags, perfumes, colognes, tissues, hair products, sanitizers, and lotions all at what appear to be different stations, and on the wall opposite the mirrors and tables, are hooks. Some of which are occupied, and at least one of which has a leather jacket on it that most certainly belongs to Richie.

Richie nears where his clothes are, and, keeping his back to Eddie, murmurs, "do you wanna talk about it?"

Eddie watches Richie take off his stage jacket, drape it over a clear space on the tabletop, and then reach back, to pull his red shirt forward, and off.

He watches how the muscles in Richie's broad, upper-back scrunch, and flex as he gets a grip on the collar of his shirt, and then his eyes fall down to the small of Richie's back, the nice curve of his tailbone, being slowly revealed, and he's not muscular, exactly, but he looks strong, still. He's fit. It's nice.

It's *very* nice.

"Eddie?"

"Huh?"

Richie looks to him through the mirror, and Eddie feels his face flush - he hadn't realized that Richie might have seen him ogling through their reflections.

"Do you want to talk about what I said on stage?"

Before Eddie can gather his thoughts enough to answer, Richie adds,

“because it’s okay if you don’t. We don’t ever have to talk about it. I’ll be okay.”

“You’ve done so much - so much *right* in your life, Richie.”

Confused by this response, Richie turns around to face Eddie.

“What?”

“You said - you talked about how you felt when you knelt down next to me, in the Neibolt house, when I broke my arm, how you wanted to fix it for me, because you ‘just wanted to do something right for once.’ You said you were crazy about me.”

Eddie is endlessly fascinated with how flushed Richie’s cheeks get.

“Yeah. I did.”

“You said you didn’t pity me, and you never believed I was sick, even when I believed it. You wanted to protect me anyway, though, cause you loved me. You said it wasn’t okay that I was scared - that anytime I was scared, it wasn’t okay, whether it was cause of Bowers, or Pennywise, I guess, but... man, you stayed with me. You dumped your soda on Bowers in the movies, and you knelt down next to me in Neibolt - you - you put yourself between Pennywise and me, Richie - like, *more* than once.”

Richie ducks his head, rubbing the back of his neck, “yeah.”

“And you know me well enough to know I didn’t hate you, and I wasn’t angry at you, even though I was screaming and cursing at you - you always just *got* me, you know? You’ve always understood the things I said, and didn’t say. You were so patient with me, too, you were so kind that day, and you fuckin’ set my arm without my permission, but you... you did it, cause you wanted to help. You wanted me to love you back.”

“This going anywhere? I gotta tell you, my version of events sounded like, way more bearable than how raw this is making me feel,” Richie says with a cough of a laugh.

“Richie, I always loved you.”

Richie's head snaps up, and Eddie smiles at him through watery eyes, "you're such a doofus. I mean that. You're a doofus, Richie. I loved you then, and I love you now. Myra would never have knelt by me. Myra would have run for her life - no matter her age, no matter whether she ever really loved me or not - she wouldn't have dumped soda on Bowers, she wouldn't have fought Bill in my honor, she wouldn't have swung that bat at Pennywise, she wouldn't have told me I was brave, braver than I knew, she wouldn't have held my hand in front of the Scary Doors, she never looked at me like you have *always* looked at me, and, Rich, I married the wrong person, and we all already knew that, but what's worse, and what I'm trying to get at here, I guess, is that the *right* person to marry had been in my life all along. I just... I just hadn't known. I forgot."

Two tears fall from both of Richie's eyes in quick succession, and Eddie steps closer to him, smiling gently, "I couldn't go back to being asleep, Richie. I couldn't go back to Myra, I don't even want to stay in New York anymore. When I got back here, all I wanted to do was find my way back to *you*. I thought my life should be in some order first, before I just - you know, showed up on your doorstep, demanding you spend the rest of your life with me - and it's in some semblance of order now, I mean, and I can... I want to, Rich. I wanna stay with you."

Feeling daring, running on a lot of adrenaline, and possibly too much sugar from his soda, he walks up to Richie, cranes his neck to look up at him, takes his glasses off, and puts them gently aside on the table.

He gazes into Richie's eyes, smiles more broadly, and tells him, "you always waited up for me. When I had trouble standing up my bike, or my timer went off, and I had to stop in the middle of playing, or something, to take my pills, or I fell behind the group cause I was the shortest - you always waited up for me. I don't need you to wait anymore. I'm all caught up. So... Rich?"

"Yeah?" Richie asks, voice a crackly whisper.

Smirking, Eddie says, "I *do* want you to fucking touch me."

Stunned for a beat, Richie doesn't move at first, just blinks in astonishment - but once he does move, it's a whirlwind - he snaps out

of his frozen state, grips Eddie's jaw, and pulls him forward, kissing him deeply, and forcing Eddie to jump up onto his toes.

As his head is turned for better access, Eddie isn't necessarily surprised that Richie is a good kisser - 'surprised,' isn't the right word. Delighted, more like - Eddie often let himself imagine what making out with Richie would be like, especially in their later teen years, but it had never been like this in his daydreams.

Once Eddie relaxes into the kiss, Richie wraps one strong arm around Eddie's back, pulling him in close, and one of Eddie's hands winds up on Richie's chest, and he feels Richie's chest hair, feels how broad his pec is, and it's so distinctly *masculine*, it's unlike anything Eddie's done or felt before.

"Tell me again," Richie rasps, moving to kiss Eddie at the turn of his jaw.

Dipping his head back, Eddie breathlessly asks, "to fucking touch me?"

Groaning, Richie replies, "that sounds fantastic, don't get me wrong, but not what I meant - tell me you love me again."

Shutting his eyes, holding onto Richie's flanks, Eddie grins broadly, and tells him, "I do. I love you."

"Again," Richie pleads, sucking on Eddie's jugular like a teenager, his enormous hands moving down to hold him by the hips.

A lot less blood flow is going to the head on his shoulders, and it's making Eddie dizzy, but he likes it. He's always liked the way Richie turns him upside down, and inside out.

"I love you."

"Fuck yeah," Richie mumbles against his skin, his hold hard enough to bruise, "Eds. Gonna take you home with me."

"I'd like that," Eddie agrees, a little breathlessly, "I think I'd like that a lot, Richie."

“Never letting you out of my fuckin’ sight again, Eds. Your future is just - just stupid Hawaiian Dad Shirts, and band-t’s, and my ugly glasses, and the only thing I know how to make is a baked ziti.”

“I will be introducing you to several vegetables, Richie, and you’ll be making room in your closet for my ties, and dress pants, thank you very much -”

“Running shorts?”

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Eddie laughs out.

“Eddie - I wanna touch you.”

“Yeah, I’m liking it,” Eddie murmurs back, feeling blissfully dream-like while Richie mouths at his sensitive clavicle like he’s starving.

“I - listen, I don’t have like, any emotional energy left to be anything but totally straight-forward right now - can I get you off?”

They both pull away enough to stare into each other’s eyes again, and Eddie’s face must say it all, because it takes maybe point-two seconds before Richie fumbles to untuck Eddie’s shirt, and get at his zip, same as Eddie struggles to get his wrists between Richie’s forearms, and unbuckle his belt.

Before he’s fully aware anything is happening at all, Eddie finds himself in the air, being hoisted onto the makeup table, his pants partway down.

“This is so disrespectful of this space, oh my God,” Eddie giggles.

“Fuck this room, dude - remember all the cocaine? This is the most wholesome shit this place has ever seen, okay? Now, I’m taking your pants off, so don’t kick me -”

“Richie,” Eddie laughs out, feeling ridiculous, his bare ass cold against the tabletop.

“And definitely keep saying my name - I’m into that.”

“Richie!” Eddie half-laughs, half-scolds.



“Yeah, man, you got it - that’s the good shit.”

“Oh my God.”

With as much respect as he can seem to muster while still seeming impatient, Richie removes Eddie’s shoes, and pulls his jeans, and underwear down to the floor, then crouches down, so he can take the hard line of Eddie’s cock into his mouth.

It's a fluid, smooth movement, hot, wet, and tight all at once; Eddie’s hands fly to Richie’s hair, his toes curl, and he moans obscenely at the way Richie’s tongue flexes, and swirls around the length of him.

“*Oh*, Jesus Christ, Richie, that’s incredible,” Eddie breathes out, leaning back toward the mirrors, feeling hot drool drip down his sac, and probably onto the table - it's entirely obscene.

Moaning back, Richie moves his hands to Eddie’s calves, running them up over the light hair on his legs, spreading them further at the knees, bobbing his head at a beautiful pace, seeming as if he wants more of Eddie in his mouth, somehow, though Eddie isn't sure what more Richie could do aside from swallow him whole.

Not that he intends to publicize it, but Eddie knows it’s been well over five months since last he got off, and that was by himself - he thinks it’s only fair that he warn Richie that he’s a hairpin trigger currently, and so he tries his best.

“I’m gonna - Rich - you’re - you’re really fuckin’ good at that - just - I’m gonna come -”

Before Eddie can embarrass himself, Richie pulls away, stands up (Eddie hears his knees crack, and thinks they’re too old for this sort of shit, but he’s not about to vocalize that), and undoes the button of his jeans.

Transfixed, Eddie stares at Richie’s dexterous hands, pulling his zipper down, and shucking his pants down just far enough, and then he's just openly admiring Richie's cock, which is something he didn't know he'd be compelled to do. It's sort of gorgeous, though. It's got a slight curve on it, a defined head, a throbbing vein that makes Eddie's

mouth water for some reason, and it's dark, sat in a thicket of black curls - Eddie doesn't even realize any time has passed until Richie gives a laugh, and asks, "like what you're seeing, Eds?"

Eddie's eyes snap back to Richie's, and he feels his face flush darker than it already is.

It takes a second for Eddie to compute that Richie doesn't look as sure as he sounds.

"Do you?"

Smiling, Eddie pulls his shirt, and sweater off, tossing them just anywhere else, and then he spreads his arms out, reaching for Richie.

"I love what I'm seeing, Rich."

"You keep using the word 'love,' Eds, and I'm gonna bust a nut way before you're ready for me to."

"You're disgusting, Richie," Eddie laughs.

"Ugh," Richie groans, staring down at how his cock twitches in response to Eddie's voice, "See? Being mean does it too! Just, stop talking altogether."

"Stop talking? *Me?*"

"I'm affection-starved, dude. *And* touch-starved. I'm like, at least seven different types of starved. This whole night is insane."

Pulling Richie by the arm, Eddie directs him to stand between his legs, and Eddie's grateful that Richie isn't saying anything about the table's elevation giving them a perfect height advantage. It lines their waists up just right.

When Eddie realizes that Richie is reaching for a lotion bottle nearby, he asks, "is that, like - regulation for this sort of shit?"

"Sex lube?" Richie asks ridiculously, "No, dude, no one just leaves sex lube out on makeup tables, in changing rooms at Radio City Hall. It's lotion, though, and we'll want it for this."

“Yeah, but it’s not meant for the thing we’re using it for. That could be, like - bad for our health, or something -”

“It’s lotion.”

“Not all lotion is created equal, Richie!” Eddie insists, “If it’s not designed for sex stuff, it could give you a UTI, or something!”

“It will not give either of us a fucking UTI, Eddie - Jesus, relax!”

“I’m right, though! If it’s perfumed, it could -”

“Are you expecting me to slow down right now, seriously, because you’ve got an issue with your dick possibly smelling like lavender for the rest of the evening?”

“Richie, you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Just to be clear, I’d *love* to be a pain in your ass, Eddie, but I figure the night’s still young, we shouldn’t count it out, but for right now -”

“I hate you.”

“Stop being mean, or I will come all over you.”

Laughing again, Eddie stops arguing, and admires the handsome smile his own humor puts on Richie’s face.

Richie steals some of the lotion from a nearby station, and rubs his hands together, warming it, and Eddie thinks to himself that Richie’s a considerate lover.

It’s not an odd thought to have, exactly, just not one he ever thought he *would* have.

“Ready?” Richie asks, voice thick.

“More than,” Eddie answers, sitting up further to grip at Richie’s shoulders.

Richie presses their foreheads together, and then pulls both their cocks into one of his massive hands - Eddie’s eyes flutter shut.

*"Fuck - yeah - please, Richie."*

"Jesus Christ," Richie bemoans, sounding tortured, staring down at them both.

He moves slowly at first, getting a feel for how firm his grip needs to be, to fit the both of them, and keep the friction going, but then it's desperate pumps, coupled by desperate noises Eddie never thought he'd hear from Richie.

Eddie never really got good at hiding his own noises - he could never masturbate at home, when he was actually going through puberty and it felt like a life-or-death situation - the time at which, he understands, other young men like him learned to be quiet. He didn't masturbate at home, and practice his quiet-making, because his bedroom door had no lock, and he did *not* want his mother walking in on that. He'd wait for the rare occasions he was home alone, and then he'd be as loud as he pleased, because there was no one there to hear him, anyway.

College, he'd wait until he had the dorm to himself too, and so he never needed to quiet himself then either. He got married soon after, and he still found himself waiting long periods of time to be alone with himself.

The point being that he never bothered to hone that skill - he's loud, and he knows he's loud, and there's little he can do about it.

Richie, on the other hand, is visibly struggling to keep himself quiet, huffing, groaning, his entire torso is trembling muscles, and Eddie is compelled to make a mission of wringing Richie's sex noises out of him.

Eddie imagines what it might be like, to ride Richie - to tie him down, and pull the noises from him, not stop until Richie is begging, or shouting, or crying out for him.

He thinks, someday very soon, he'll do just that.

"I - I can't last much longer," Richie warns him.

Thinking he might be able to push Richie over the edge with it, Eddie

plants his hand behind Richie's neck, and pulls him into a truly filthy, open-mouthed kiss. It's sloppy, wet, hot, and Eddie's still hearing himself moan against Richie's mouth - he can feel Richie's teeth when he murmurs, "oh, Jesus, *fuck* -" and then there's a pulsing against him.

Cum hits the bottom of his chin, a bit on his chest, he thinks it splashes Richie too, and there's something innocent about it, oddly. There's something very teenaged, and ridiculous about the entire thing, and the knowledge that *he* pushed Richie over, that his *kisses* have that power over another man - it's all Eddie needs.

He makes a point to splash back.

If either of them could catch their breath, he's pretty sure they'd laugh about it.

Richie stands there for a long while, hands on Eddie's thighs, lips moving against his, still affectionate, and still hungry.

Eddie's eager to give him more, but -

"Everyone's waiting on us."

"Mm," Richie agrees, "I could text them to get lost."

"Do not do that."

"I'm hearing a 'maybe.'"

"Richie, I was hungry before I made it to the show, and this little exercise has left me fucking ravenous, okay? We're going to dinner."

Giggling, Richie kisses just under Eddie's ear, and asks, "ravenous? That sounds serious. Okay. You win, Spaghetti. Dinner it is."

Richie still spends another two minutes kissing Eddie, and Eddie has no real motivation to stop him; the only reason they do eventually clean off, and get dressed at all is because Eddie's stomach gives a loud, incriminating growl that Richie won't let him live down.

There's a small, private bathroom off to the side of the dressing room,

and Richie washes up in there, using a hand towel to wash off the sweat, and cum, and once he's dried off with a separate towel, he changes into his street clothes, which aren't so unlike his stage ones.

Predictably, Eddie takes longer to get himself washed up, but he smiles the entire time, even when he nearly trips getting his shoes on, because his equilibrium has been entirely fucked by coming so hard, so unexpectedly.

They wonder back and forth at each other how obvious they'll be to the Losers, and Eddie doesn't look forward to the ribbing he's in for, but he figures he's in with Richie now enough that he can elbow him at any point, and just say, 'roast Mike for me, babe, he's being mean,' and Richie will probably just do it on command.

Eddie will still get it the worst, he knows, but he likes that too, a little bit.

As they're headed back to their friends, satiated, and unkempt in very telling ways, Richie asks casually, half-jokingly, "so - can I call you my boyfriend in my next routine?"

"*Boyfriend?*" Eddie asks, outraged, "You think you're going to call me your *boyfriend* in your next special? You're out of your mind."

Richie stops in his tracks, looking mortified, until Eddie side-eyes him, still fixing at some of the buttons on his shirt, beneath his sweater, and tells him, "I'll be your husband by then. You think I got patience to be your boyfriend for more than a year? You're nuts, Richie. And the proposal better be dignified. No jokey-proposals, or as God as my witness, Richie, I will say 'no,' until you get it right."

It's as if Richie melts where he stands, "oh - that was so mean, Eddie."

Smirking, Eddie retorts, "yeah, well, you're an asshole, and you called me a feral badger. So. I got one in."

"And - how are you so sure I'm gonna propose? You don't wanna take the lead on that?"

"You are absolutely proposing to me, Richie, and it's going to be

romantic, and sweet, and it's going to occur within the next six to eight months."

"Have you risk-analyzed my marriage proposal?" Richie asks through a widening grin, "Seriously, dude?"

"You're Goddamn right I have - any longer than eight months, and you will be in serious danger, Richie."

"Danger of what!? I didn't even know if we were for-sure dating after that little hook-up stunt!"

"Stunt!? What do you take me for!? And you'll be in danger of getting my foot lodged so far up your ass, you'll be tasting my shoes!"

"Oh, I love it when you get mean. Threaten my ass more, Eddie, I like it -"

"You're disgusting, and I hate you," Eddie tells him plainly, walking ahead of him so Richie doesn't see the smile breaking across his face.

He hears Richie chasing after him, "*unnh!* Yes, babe! Gimme more!"

"Oh my God, enough!" Eddie cackles.

Richie goes to say more, but Eddie's able to stop whatever other disturbing shit he's going to say by grabbing his hand, and holding on tightly.

With his free hand, Richie nudges his glasses further up his nose, and Eddie smiles warmly at him.

"Boyfriend for now, but not for long, got it?"

Fascinated, Eddie watches how Richie tries his hardest to fight the enormous smile that eventually takes over his entire face, and before they reach the Losers, all awaiting them, Richie answers confidently, "got it."